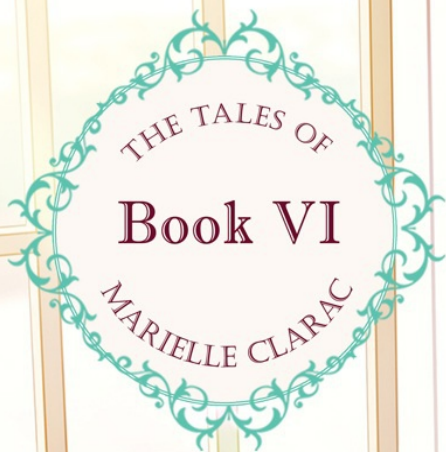




The Matchmaking
of *Marielle Clarac*

Author: Haruka Momo Illustrator: Maro

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THE TALES OF
Book VI
MARIELLE CLARAC

The Matchmaking
of *Marielle Clarac*

Author: Haruka Momo Illustrator: Maro



Julianne Sorel

18 years old. Daughter of Baron Sorel. Marielle's best friend and an avid reader who likes a rather specific type of content. Being courted by Prince Severin, who has fallen in love with her.

Duke Silvestre

One of the three great dukes of the Kingdom of Lagrange. Handsome, but a real pain to deal with. His whims can make him seem either generous or vicious.

Nigel Shannon

The ambassador from the neighboring country of Casdale. The nephew of an important duke. Has honey-colored hair and eyes and golden brown skin, reflecting his heritage from the southern land of Shulk.

Princess Henriette

20 years old. Prince Severin's youngest sister. Can seem imposing, but is a sweet and openhearted princess.

Adrien Flaubert

24 years old. The middle son of House Flaubert. A naval officer assigned to Gandia.

Noel Flaubert

15 years old. The youngest son of House Flaubert. Appears at first glance to have a sweet and angelic disposition.

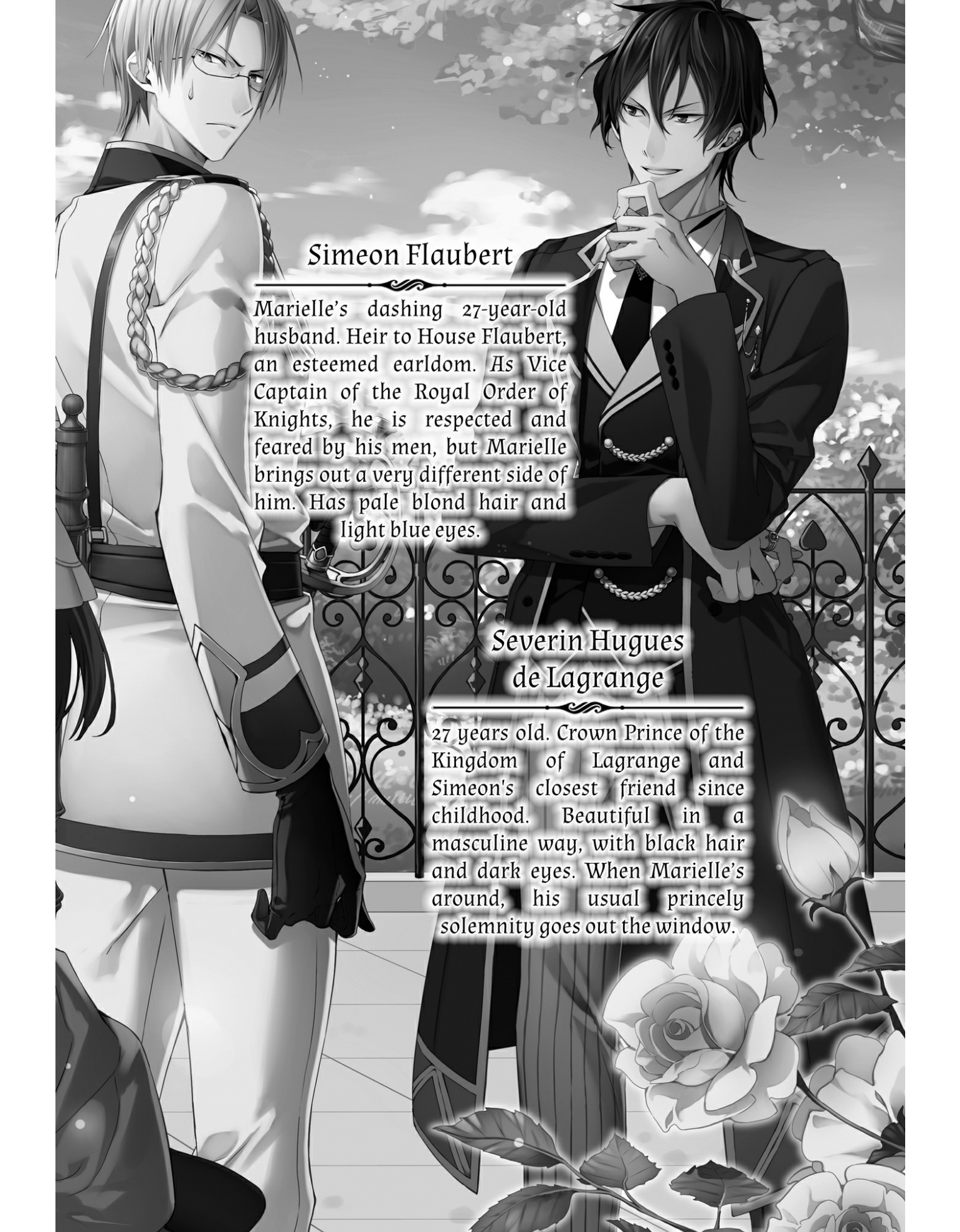
Lutin

An internationally notorious thief. He exclusively targets nobles and the wealthy, so the lower classes see him as a hero. Keenly interested in Marielle.

Marielle Flaubert

19 years old. Daughter of Viscount Clarac. Has brown hair and brown eyes, and wears glasses. Entirely plain, with no real distinguishing qualities. Can suppress her presence, hiding in plain sight to observe people and gather information. Secretly a popular author called Agnès Vivier.





Simeon Flaubert

Marielle's dashing 27-year-old husband. Heir to House Flaubert, an esteemed earldom. As Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, he is respected and feared by his men, but Marielle brings out a very different side of him. Has pale blond hair and light blue eyes.

Severin Hugues de Lagrange

27 years old. Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Lagrange and Simeon's closest friend since childhood. Beautiful in a masculine way, with black hair and dark eyes. When Marielle's around, his usual princely solemnity goes out the window.

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Chapter One

I, Marielle Flaubert née Clarac, aged nineteen, had officially made my debut in society as the newest member of the esteemed House Flaubert!

As a result, however, I found myself in grave danger, the likes of which I had never faced before.

“Oh, how lovely! That white dress has such a polished air about it. It suits you perfectly!”

“Is it an original from Madame Pelagie? It’s delightful!”

“Truly it is! The design is rather elaborate, but you wear it to perfection.”

The gaggle of fabulously dressed ladies all came from houses of great renown. They surrounded me, fixed smiles on their faces, and were showering me with praise. No doubt they had scoffed at me in the past, whether behind their fans or openly in public. When my engagement was first announced, I had been the victim of more than my fair share of malicious gossip, and even snide comments spoken directly to my face.

“What a mismatched couple!” they had said. “How comical! What sort of game is he playing, proposing to a girl so lacking in the looks department? Her family doesn’t even have money or land, so there’s no value to the connection. Why have the earl and countess allowed it?”

The very same people who had laughed at me were now presenting a diametrically opposed attitude. The reversal was so thorough that it was nothing short of impressive.

“You’re so calm and collected for such a young lady! So mature! I couldn’t imagine anyone more suitable to marry into the illustrious House Flaubert.”

“The earl and countess must be so glad to have such a charming new daughter-in-law!”

Their opinions hadn’t *actually* undergone such a dramatic change, of course. I

was quite certain they were still making the same spiteful comments behind my back. However, they made sure to do it in secret, where it wouldn't reach my ears. On the surface they treated me with kindness, while their true thoughts remained hidden.

The reason was that House Flaubert was far more important than House Clarac. Making an enemy of my own family would be of no consequence to these ladies at all, but inciting the ire of House Flaubert was a far riskier proposition. I'd now become someone whose good favor they had to win with carefully chosen words.

That's the secret of success in high society, isn't it? Bending over backwards in public to please others in order to suit your own ends, while the comments you make privately become even meaner and more malicious. Ooh, the dirty world of mud-slinging noblewomen! It truly fires up my creative urges!

As an author, I adored having the chance to observe this up close. It was an excellent means of gathering reference material.

There was only one problem.

"How vexing," said one of the ladies as their fawning continued ceaselessly. "If my son had been just a tad more astute, he'd have proposed to you before the lad from House Flaubert."

"Indeed!" said another. "I'm terribly jealous!"

Without ever letting their smiles drop, they continued to spout these empty compliments. It was most impressive. Their strength of will mesmerized me. The hidden irony buried in every sentence was so wonderfully inspiring.

However, I was struggling.

With an awkward laugh, I forced myself to give a polite reply. "Your generous words leave me more grateful than I can express. I can scarcely begin to know how to thank you."

Ugh, my word! I feel a cramp in my face! How can I possibly remain calm and serene under these circumstances!? It's not only these few ladies—I swear everyone in the entire hall is focusing all their attention on me, and I simply cannot cope! Please, I'm begging you, stop looking at me! Ignore my existence!

Just standing out in the open, being noticed, made me feel as though my odds of survival were dropping. As a creature that had endured by blending into the background and not allowing anyone to sense my presence, the situation was nothing short of terrifying.

Yes, I'm a pitiful insect that's now been exposed to the bright sunlight, with no trees or rocks behind which to take shelter. This is a feral kingdom where birds circle overhead and beasts prowl around stalking their prey. An insect, which has no way to protect itself except by hiding, can expect to be nothing but food.

No matter how many missteps I might have taken, I should never have ended up quite this exposed! Heavens, I have no hope of ever living through this. My fate is sealed—I'll be gobbled up before I know it!

"Marielle, sorry to have left you alone."

Suddenly, a cool, refreshing wind blew across the parched landscape I was lost in. The tall figure that now stood beside me blocked the excessively strong rays of sunlight, protecting me with his shade.

"You must be rather worn out. Why don't we go elsewhere and take a moment to rest?"

His gentle voice in my ear, full of consideration for my needs, stopped the ingratiating ladies in their tracks. Nestling close to me now was the one who could chase away the hyenas and vultures, the cheetahs and jackals: the king of all animals.

His pale golden mane—admittedly cut into rather too short and neat a style to be described as such—shone beautifully as it reflected the light. The eyes that looked at me from behind those glasses were as clear as ice, though sometimes they burned with fiery intensity, while other times they were as gentle as the spring sky. His dashing handsome face was perfectly refined, with firm dignity and delicate softness mixed in just the right proportions, while his trained body moved with effortless energy.

Even knowing about the fearsome fangs he kept hidden, it was impossible to avoid being drawn to his beauty. *Look, even that herd of young zebras over there are blushing over him! Well, maybe calling them zebras is slightly odd. I'm not sure 'rhinos' or 'elephants' would feel quite right, either. Can't I find a*

smaller and cuter animal? Monkeys, maybe? Oh, but then perhaps he's not a lion, but a gorilla. Gorillas are fairly impressive as well!

"Marielle?"

The voice that spoke my name brought me back to reality. The illusion of a vast savannah disappeared and the elegant ball stood before me once more. Beneath the shining chandeliers, the sounds of convivial laughter and clinking glasses rang out.

"Why is your head in the clouds? Are you truly that exhausted? I hope you're not feeling unwell."

My husband drew closer still, stooping down to peer at me. I stared intently at his beautiful face beset by a look of worry, and I pondered whether he was more a lion or a gorilla.

"No, I'm quite all right. I was merely thinking about the king of the forest and the king of the savannah. Which environment do you prefer, Lord Simeon?"

"What? Why those two choices, exactly? Wait, no, I'd rather not know. It seems better to avoid asking about either your reasons or your conclusions."

Without me having realized, we had changed locations. He'd brought me to some chairs by a wall, with the group of ladies from a moment ago nowhere to be seen. Becoming aware that my ever-dependable husband had saved me from them, I heaved a sigh of relief.

"I have to escape from reality or I won't be able to cope. My word, didn't I tell you this dress was too extravagant? If I stand out so much, it will surely be the death of me! I must wear camouflage, I simply must!"

He sat me down and got me a drink from a passing member of the serving staff. After gulping down the carbonated fruit wine, I calmed down somewhat.

He replied, "I'm quite sure you won't die. Personally I'd love for you to wear whatever you'd prefer, but my mother sees dressing to impress as a *raison d'être*. I doubt she'd allow you to wear the sort of plain and functional clothes that would let you disappear. One might argue that society is all about making an impression, after all. Hiding away rather defeats the purpose."

I groaned. “My chances of survival are slipping by the second.”

Lord Simeon was high society’s very own Prince Charming—the knight in shining armor who everyone dreamed of. After marrying a man like this, I would never be able to return to my previous way of life. My existence had been one of blending in and secretly observing people as a reference for my writing, but from now on I would have to gather material in a different manner. As the wife of a future earl, it was incumbent upon me to form connections in society and broaden my social sphere.

Of course, I married him knowing this, so I had no regrets, but it was exhausting nonetheless. Society was all about the survival of the fittest, and I was an insect, relegated to the very bottom of the food chain. The bitter fight for survival left me shuddering in fear. Still, I had no choice but to fight on and learn to manage this. It was a requirement for being with the one I loved.

Now that I think about it, it will soon have been a whole year since he proposed to me.

It was around the end of summer. My father brought a suitor home to meet me—one who fit perfectly within my tastes. This dashing young man was an archetype known as the brutal, blackhearted military officer.

His title, Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, was enough alone to light my fangirl fire. He wasn’t the Captain, but the Vice Captain, and that was exactly right. Not the leading role, but the dashing young man with a roguish air who’s often seen in a supporting role—that’s the type of character I adore most of all.

After my societal debut, I’d noticed this perfect man and privately fangirled over him whenever I gazed at him from a distance. *How wonderful he is*, I had thought as I daydreamed. *The only way he’d look better is with a riding crop in his hand.*

Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that my ideal man would propose to me.

Naturally, the “blackhearted” aspect of him came entirely from my own imagination. Lord Simeon turned out to be a very kind person. Though he has a somewhat villainous outward appearance that suggests he’s hiding some

ulterior motive, inside he's actually a stubborn blockhead—a straitlaced man who is in many ways the antithesis of me. He is remarkably intelligent and resourceful, and admittedly does have a *few* blackhearted tendencies, but at his core he's an excessively earnest and sincere sort of gentleman. In getting to know the real Lord Simeon, not the one I'd created in my mind, I learned that he was a wonderful person and someone I could depend on more than anyone else.

Being not only the heir to a high-ranking house but also a close confidant of His Highness the Crown Prince, it goes without saying that he held widespread appeal as a potential husband. Countless esteemed houses had made offers of marriage; a mere viscount's daughter like me, with no real rank or fortune to my name, should never have been in the running at all.

Though I feared there had been some kind of mistake, the unbelievable reality was that he had proposed because he was in love with me. Truth really can be stranger than fiction. Though all around considered me to be rather an oddball, Lord Simeon was equally strange in his own way. Certainly, a normal Prince Charming would never have chosen someone like me. Even when they start off downtrodden and covered in ashes, the girls who find their handsome prince are always beautiful princesses themselves. What sort of a prince falls for an insect always hiding away from view?

However, now that my protector had released me from the terror of being immediately eaten, I was able to casually gaze out across the crowds again. When I did so, a few faces caught my eye.

"Oh, those gentlemen are a rather rare sight in society, aren't they? Marquess Rafale and Baron Caplet—and their two companions are from parliament as well, I believe. I wonder why they've all come here today? The head of this house isn't part of their reformist faction, is he? Though he does have deep connections to the economic world, so I can imagine he has a lively exchange of ideas even with those who are. That must be the connection, maybe."

When I turned to look at my husband, I wasn't sure if the expression he looked back with was exasperated or impressed. "It's tough for me to honestly call it a virtue given your impure motives, but your power of memory is quite admirable. It's as though you're able to fit a complete directory inside your

head.”

“Impure? How so? I’m just lightly referencing them for my writing, that’s all. Besides, gathering information is a hobby in itself for me.”

“Yes, I see what you mean. It’s always easy to remember new information about subjects one is greatly interested in. For you, people are more interesting than anything else. Isn’t that right?” He let out a small chuckle. “However, I can’t abide the way your attention is always being stolen away by other men even when I’m right beside you. Do you find me so uninteresting by comparison?”

His words had something of a peevish ring to them, but the gaze he turned on me held more than a hint of allure. The man himself probably wasn’t even aware of it, but I was momentarily stunned. *Goodness, he has a way of hitting me with a surprise attack. I can scarcely imagine a wife whose heart wouldn’t race if her beloved husband looked at her like this!*

“You know the answer to that question. You’ve no need to be mean.”

“Mean? I’m honestly expressing what I’m thinking, that’s all. I’m used to you getting excited at events like this, excitedly observing all the people and gathering as much material as you can, but I do wish you’d consider me a little more. I’m right next to you, but it’s as though you’ve forgotten all about me. It feels rather lonely, I confess. It’s not every day that we can go out together, so I’d like you to look at me.”

I fell silent. My husband, a man who was serious to a fault, had delivered these lines entirely sincerely. There was not even the barest hint of irony in his tone, and I knew him well enough to know he indeed meant every word.

That fact made the intensity of his magnetism even more tremendous. I inadvertently found myself struggling to breathe and on the verge of fangirling myself to death.

My word! How, how, HOW can this spectacular prince be so dense!?

I wanted to scream at him: *As if I could ever forget your existence! If there’s anyone who could forget about you, I’d certainly like to meet them! Even in the largest of crowds, you stand out with the tall body that you’ve been blessed with*

and further honed to perfection, not to mention the dignified way you carry yourself. You'll catch any eye for at least a moment, and once that happens, a longer glance reveals you as the owner of incomparable good looks, shocking the observer yet again. In terms of sheer presence, you are in a class all your own—so how can you honestly say a thing like that!?

The response I managed was briefer. "I'm looking at you, I promise. If this isn't enough, I'll have to look at nothing but you, every single moment."

"And if I really asked you to do that? To never look at anything but me?"

I swallowed hard as his pretty face came closer to mine. When his light blue eyes were fixed on me at close range, making the hypothetical seem suddenly literal, I honestly felt as though I was about to breathe my last breath.

"Never might be a step too far," I said hesitantly. "It would exceed my bodily limits."

Reflexively, I opened my fan and blocked my husband's gaze. He let out a small chuckle, then delivered a warm kiss to my still-exposed temple.

My word, I'm happy, but so self-conscious! This ticklish feeling is simply too much. I want to shout and scream wildly.

The bittersweet sensation spreading through my whole body was one I liked, of course, but I couldn't even hope to remain calm.

Occasional passersby made faces of disbelief. Their surprise was only natural; most people knew Lord Simeon only as a man with a perfect smile or a cold, expressionless look. Either way, he was always elegant and composed. From the way he typically presented himself in society, no one would have guessed at his sometimes frightening passion or the sweet nothings he could whisper like this.

The sensuality exuded by this dashing, villainous young man had an immense destructive power. I only wished he would notice that the ruinous impact extended beyond his wife and reached bystanders as well.

The young ladies and married women over there have all been struck by your passion as well. They look as though they're about to faint! What about that gentleman? Why is his face going red, too? My my, what a wicked husband I have. Young and old, male and female, he bewitches them all and doesn't even

realize he's doing it.

"I'm always thinking about you, Lord Simeon. Now, which do you like better, the forest or the savannah?"

"This again?" he replied in a sullen tone, pulling his body away.

Goodness, my face is burning! How frustrating for every little movement my husband makes to leave me trembling so. I suppose that's just how attractive he is.

He continued, "I'm not sure how to decide that. If I had to choose, I suppose it would be the forest."

"Ah, I see. That settles it then. Gorilla!"

"What do gorillas have to do with anything!?"

The longer we live together, the more we'll feel at home with one another. Being next to you every day, conversing with you, touching you and being touched... Arguing about trivial things and sharing our joy... By way of all these, we will become a family.

Once upon a time, my Prince Charming, who is very handsome but a trifle odd, noticed a small insect. He took a liking to that insect and brought it back to his castle with him.

That insect turned out to be a young lady, and she became the prince's bride. Everyone frowned, wondering how such a strange match had come to be, but the two of them embraced one another, comfortable in each other's company, and lived together in happiness.

And what's wrong with a story like that?

Chapter Two

In the round room the color of caramel, I let out a sigh of wonder, and not for the first time. I looked around at the window frames, pillars, and built-in bookcases, all of which were uniformly made of wood in the same subdued shade. The refined interior design, with everything polished to a sheen, was simply beautiful. The floor was a wooden mosaic, and the ceiling, supported by round pillars, curved in a smooth arc. Matching this, the upper parts of the windows were semicircular. As far as possible, straight lines had been avoided in favor of soft curves.

The dome-shaped ceiling was painted pale green, with a pattern that also used green as the base color. The curtains were pale green as well, while the upholstery on the chairs was a subdued shade of deep red that fit in very well with the surrounding hues.

I'd finished putting my things in order a while ago now, leaving me with nothing left to do here, but I continued to gaze around the room, still breathless. *This beautiful room, this wonderful room, really is my own personal study!*

Since getting engaged, I'd had all manner of experiences that could only be described as "wonderful." The engagement itself fell into that category, and it seemed my married life would be full of even more wonders. I wasn't sure if I was truly allowed to be so blessed. It was as though I'd been given more happiness than I deserved, and that karma would surely come to exact its reckoning.

Arranged on the bookcases covering one wall was not only the collection of books I'd brought from my family's home, but also various dictionaries and reference books provided by my in-laws. Amongst all these, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, sat the romance novels of Agnès Vivier. Not having to hide my secret life was a very pleasant surprise indeed. My new father-and mother-in-law, the earl and countess, magnanimously allowed me to continue

with my secret work. This was of course under the condition that I fulfill all my duties as a wife and member of the family, but my work on the sort of popular fiction that many looked upon with disdain was met with little more than a “Well, I never.”

Ever since my engagement to Lord Simeon had become official, House Flaubert had been carrying out remodeling work to facilitate our life here as a couple. I knew about the rooms that had been prepared for the two of us, such as the bedroom, living room, powder room, and such, but I had no idea there would be a study just for me. To be fair, it was entirely normal for a wife to have her own study; the mistress of a house needed somewhere to carry out the duties associated with that role. However, I had never expected that one so fine would be prepared for me, with such scrupulous attention to detail. I suspected Lord Simeon had put a word in about it.

I ran my hand across the top of the solid desk placed in front of a large window. *From now on, this is where I'll be writing. What kinds of tales will I spin? I want my readers to feel all the excitement I'm feeling right now—to bring even more wonders into the world.*

Sighing one last time, I said to myself, “I’d better pull myself away. It’ll be dark soon.”

I wanted to remain there, rapt by my new study, but I had to exercise some moderation. I shook off my lingering attachment and bent down to speak to the white ball of fur rummaging around under the desk.

“Chouchou, we have to go now.”

Her blue eyes turned to look at me just for a moment before losing interest again. She resumed her peeking around and sniffing; it seemed she wouldn’t be satisfied until she’d thoroughly investigated every last corner of the room.

“Honestly, Chouchou! Isn’t that enough for now?”

I knew my cat’s habits, but it would have been nice of her to make life easy for me just this once.

I opened the door and acted as though I was leaving. “I’m going now. That means I’ll leave you behind. Don’t blame me if you end up stuck here all alone.”

Still she ignored me. I didn't want to actually leave her there without me; there was a risk of the servants overlooking her and shutting her in. Forcibly picking her up and carrying her out was starting to look like my only option.

Just then, a familiar face appeared on the other side of the doorway.

"Miss Marielle, is Chouchou in there?"

It was a little angel with blond hair and bright blue eyes, flashing an adorable smile—my youngest brother-in-law, concealing his devil's tail. His face sparkled with expectation.

"Yes," I replied, pointing toward her. "I've told her I'm going now, but she keeps ignoring me."

"It's not ideal for her to play there. She's sure to cause some damage. Shall I get her out?"

"Certainly, if you like. I doubt she'll come even if you call her, though. She's too absorbed in her exploration."

Lord Noel slipped past me through the doorway and stepped fit into the study. In his hands he held a thin pole, which he quickly raised into the air. "Chouchou! Over here! I want to play!"

String was tied to the end of the pole, from which dangled a mouse-shaped toy laced with catnip. When Lord Noel waved this specially hand-made toy around, the cat actually responded, running toward him and leaping up to grab it before my astonished eyes. After waving the pole around in a circle, Lord Noel dashed out into the corridor with Chouchou chasing after him.

As the boy's laughter faded into the distance, I was left all alone in the silent room.

My word, the moment Lord Noel turns up, she changes her attitude completely! Why does she listen to him when she ignores me no matter what I do? Does she like a pretty young boy more than the one who raised her!? Well, I suppose she is a girl.

Taking some offense at my cat's disregard for me, I stepped out of the room. I was glad she was getting used to her new environment, at least. There would

be no need to return her to my family's house; I would be able to continue living with my little baby.

Hasn't she gotten used to it a little TOO quickly, though? Don't cats normally have more fear of strangers than this? Hmph. Well, fine, see if I care. I have my husband to show me affection. I'm a newlywed with the most wonderful, handsome husband in the entire world—so there!

Sadly, today was Lord Simeon's last day of vacation before returning to work. His important military duties made him a busy man with many subordinates to take charge of, so I knew our opportunities to simply relax together would be less frequent after this.

Oh, now that I recall, didn't he mention something about a promotion? His post will remain that of Vice Captain, but his rank will be increased by one. When he reaches his twenty-eighth birthday next month, he'll gain one more star on his rank insignia. I'd better think about parties for both his birthday and his promotion. I'll ask him what he'd like to do. Before that, though, what shall we do today?

Excited about the upcoming chances to celebrate and eager to take full advantage of the time we had together at home, I returned to our personal living room, where he awaited.

This room's look and feel was also sublime and deeply satisfying. Everything was brand new, from the wallpaper to the carpets. The moment I walked inside, however, I was left breathless and couldn't take another step.

My husband was sitting on the comfortable couch in the center of the room. Dazzling rays of summer sunlight shone through the lace curtains and glimmered on his pale blond hair.

I never grew tired of his sheer beauty; no matter how often I looked at him, he enchanted me every time. However, this time I was shocked and overwhelmed with emotion in a way beyond even that. My heart ached. *Thank you, God. Thank you for bringing this miraculous person into the world, and for letting me be born in the same era!*

Sighing, Lord Simeon turned his head my way. "What is it this time?" A moment later, enlightenment dawned in his eyes and he knitted his well-

formed eyebrows. Pointing to the object in his hand, he asked, “Is this what you’re reacting to? Surely by this point there’s nothing left to ‘fangirl’ over. You must have seen it thousands of times.”

I kneeled down on the splendid vine-patterned carpet and clasped my hands together. As tears of great joy began to flow, I said, “Don’t worry about me. This is just something of a religious experience. Thank you! Oh, thank you!”

My prayer pose made Lord Simeon frown even more deeply. “Are you listening?” The face he made was even more perfect and only increased the holiness of the whole situation.

“You’re always dashing, but this takes it to a new level! You *truly* look like a brutal, blackhearted military officer! I can just imagine the scene: your sword drawn from its scabbard, your enemies reflected in the blade, while you laugh wickedly, ready to strike. Oh, it’s too incredible for words! I can hardly stand it!”

“I’ve been sitting here alone holding a sharp implement. If I started laughing, it would suggest terrible things about my mental state! Anyway, stop imagining nonsense scenarios. I’m performing routine maintenance.”

In my husband’s hands was his beautiful saber with its sharpened blade. It was originally designed to be wielded on horseback, so the blade was long and curved. In the modern era, it was best known as the variety of sword carried by members of the military and police forces. Since he would be returning to work tomorrow, I’d understood right away that he had to inspect his favorite saber and take care of it as needed.

I recognize that, of course, but still, the impression created by him holding it is simply so incredible! A dashing man with the air of a villainous rogue holding a drawn blade in his hands! It’s fully loaded with irresistible dangerous appeal!

“Dear oh dear,” said Lord Simeon. Taking a breath, he put his tools down and picked up the scabbard.

Realizing that he was about to sheathe the sword, I stood up in a panic. “No, wait! Don’t put it away yet!”

He looked up at me quizzically and I ran over so hurriedly that I stepped on my skirt and almost tumbled to the floor. I put my hands out and begged. “I’ve

wanted to try holding your sword forever! Since time immemorial! Could I please borrow it just for a moment?”

“No.” Dismissing my request with a single word, Lord Simeon slid the saber back into its scabbard.

I clung onto his arm. “Please, all I want is to hold it! You told me I mustn’t touch it without permission, so I’ve held out all this time, but surely it’s all right if you’re here to watch!”

“Of course it isn’t! A weapon like this is not for inexperienced hands. I’ve made that very clear.”

“I don’t mean to wield it, merely to feel it in my grasp! I want to know for myself what it’s like to hold it. The weight, the length, the sensation of it in my hands! I need real experience so I can portray it in full, accurate detail!”

As an author, I couldn’t let this opportunity slip through my fingers. Though I was a romance author writing stories aimed at women, on occasion I still had to write about heroes engaging in combat.

If I write about them without having personally judged a sword’s size and heft, my depictions will never feel like more than waving a toy around. I believe it’s important to touch the real thing in order to write duel scenes with some measure of real-world experience!

When I continued to argue along those lines, I eventually wore Lord Simeon down and he reluctantly agreed. He stood from the couch and removed the saber from its scabbard again. I reached out, put my hand through the guard, and wrapped my fingers around the grip. It was thicker than I expected, and my hand wasn’t quite large enough to grip it comfortably.

Hmm, on reflection, that does make perfect sense. If it was thin enough for me to hold, it would be too thin for Lord Simeon, so he’d struggle with it. That’s exactly the sort of thing I’d never have noticed without holding it myself. How very interesting!

I tightened my grip to avoid dropping it, and felt the craftsmanship of the non-slip material in my palm. His large hands slowly shifted, but not to let me go; rather, he positioned them on top of mine to secure my grasp. The warmth

of his hand surrounding mine felt pleasantly sturdy, but I did wish it wasn't there.

"Let me hold it on my own," I insisted.

His handsome face formed into a frown once more. After a pause, he said, "You can hold it up, but that's all. Don't swing it under any circumstances."

How rude! I've told him repeatedly that I only want to hold it, but he seems to think that if left to my own devices, I'll wave it around all over the place and start slicing through the furniture!

Still, if I protested at this point he'd no doubt take it out of my hands straight away, so I dutifully nodded.

Lord Simeon slowly released his hand, and the weight I felt in my arm increased greatly. He drew up close behind me and extended his arms, surrounding me. He kept a close watch, ready to stop me at any moment.

I put more strength into my right arm, stood tall, and raised the sword into the air. Imagining an enemy before me, I thrust the point as far out in front of me as possible.

Alas, I only managed this for a bare few seconds.

My outstretched arm trembled. Even with all the strength I could muster, the end of the sword began to fall, slowly but surely. What had been an angle pointed slightly upward was soon horizontal, then lower still. As soon as this happened, Lord Simeon's hands lent their support again, and he halted the sword's descent.

"It's rather heavier than I expected!"

Unlike the greatswords used in olden times, sabers had thin blades that looked light enough for a woman to wield with ease. However, it was actually so heavy that I couldn't even hold it up.

That's quite a surprise. Lord Simeon always swings it around as if it weighs nothing. I suppose a man with a trained body would be strong enough, but I didn't know that was a requirement. Perhaps this means I shouldn't write situations where a lady is backed into a corner and starts wildly swinging a

sword about, or where she's raised as a man and fights alongside them.

With more than a hint of fatigue in his voice, he replied, "It is a lump of metal, after all. That being said, sabers are the lightest kind of sword, so I'd expect even a woman to be able to keep it steady. Not that I didn't know this already, but you really are very weak."

These words left me slightly indignant. "No more than usual! I'd like it if you didn't use a soldier's strength as the baseline, thank you very much."

"I'm not suggesting there's anything wrong with it. It's merely a truthful observation. You stand out as unique because of your personality—your unusual words and deeds—but in many ways this simply obscures the fact that you're a quintessential noblewoman. Please take this to heart and refrain from overexerting yourself."

With these casual words, Lord Simeon went to lift up the saber. I held on tightly with both hands.

"Honestly, that's enough," he said firmly.

"I barely even held it for a moment! Let me keep it just a little longer."

"What's the point in letting you hold onto it if you'll immediately drop it? It's rather terrifying to watch, I must confess. Leave the sword alone now."

"Even if I can't hold it up, I still want to feel the coldness of the blade, and the sharpness, and see my face reflected in it!"

"You're doing *nothing* to calm my nerves. Stop this."

"Wouldn't it be intriguing to peer down at the blade and see a mysterious landscape in the reflection?"

"Are you imagining it's some sort of cursed sword!? I assure you, it's an ordinary one designed for military use!"

I looked up, full of determination, and pulled on the sword with both hands. Unexpectedly, his arms wrapped around me, embracing me tightly. He grabbed the saber in one hand, while his face rapidly drew in closer.

I made a muffled sound as his lips softly met mine before I even had time to be surprised. Our glasses collided with a *clink*, but Lord Simeon ignored the

obstruction and kissed me deeply. It felt gentle only for a moment before his passion broke through and pushed at me forcefully, stealing away all my awareness. I wondered, *What's this all of a sudden!?*



He held me even more tightly, and I groaned. This ferocious contact, reminiscent of our time together at night, made the strength leave my body in an instant. Relying on his arms to support me, I surrendered my body to the enthralling intoxication. With one arm, he had captured me. All I could feel was his broad chest as he drew me into it, binding me so tightly that I had no hope of fighting back. It didn't scare me, however. The size and strength of his body, his body heat upon me—all of it was supremely comfortable. My heart pounded.

Instinctively, I closed my eyes, sensing nothing but the burning desire that entangled me. From deep inside my body, waves began to gush forth. Then, just as I felt too tantalized to bear it, his lips slowly pulled away.

I took a series of heavy breaths and opened my eyes. As I looked up at him, stunned, Lord Simeon quietly returned the sword to its scabbard.

It took a few moments before my mind caught up to what I was seeing. Before I knew it, my hands were empty. The saber, which I'd planned to hold onto as long as I could, was far out of my reach and back in Lord Simeon's care.

Gah! I've been hoodwinked!

By the time I realized, it was too late. He'd taken it away, and I had no hope of getting it back. I glared at him bitterly, but he simply adjusted his glasses and looked back at me nonchalantly.

My cheeks burned. More so than the saber, I was conscious of the deep richness of the feelings he'd just provoked in me. The sensation remained even now: soft, hot, slightly ticklish, and unbearably pleasant. The fire that he'd ignited deep in my body was still smoldering and refused to fade.

It made me excessively embarrassed to think that he knew all that. As I put my own glasses back into alignment, I jerked my head to the side, pretending to be angry, but a soft laugh reached my ears that all but confirmed he had seen right through me. This only embarrassed me further. Unable to bear it any longer, I turned my back on him entirely.

I'm at a stark disadvantage here. Time for a tactical retreat.

I decided to leave, thinking it might do me good to cool my head for a while.

However, before I reached the door, someone on the other side knocked and entered.

“Ah, I’m glad you’re here,” said the man with a gentle smile.

“Goodness,” I said reflexively. The one who had entered was not a servant, but the head of this household—the man who bore the title of ‘Earl Flaubert.’ “Hello, Lord Maximilian. I see you’re home from work.”

“Yes, I got back just now.”

Even amongst a family that was full of good-natured cordiality, my father-in-law was the most easygoing of all, responding with a causal air that contrasted with his lofty title. His golden brown hair and light brown eyes made him resemble Lord Adrien, the older of Lord Simeon’s two younger brothers. He had clean-cut features and a slight aristocratic air about him. His childlike face made him look much younger than his years; this, combined with the fact that he was a university professor, made him come across very much like a student.

Lord Simeon joined us by the door. Unlike his father, he did look his age, making the two of them look less like father and son and more like a pair of brothers separated by a moderately large age gap. “Welcome home, Father. What brings you to us? Is something the matter?”

“I came to get Marielle. She has a visitor.”

“Me?” I replied. “I wonder who it could be. I’m not expecting anyone.”

This was exactly what I needed in order to cool my addled head. Doing my utmost to avoid looking at my husband, I pondered who it might be. There were only limited possibilities, and the name Lord Maximilian spoke next was indeed one of the strongest contenders.

“It’s your friend—and cousin, isn’t that right? A blackhaired girl called Miss Julianne.”

“Ah, so that’s who it is.”

That does make sense. I can’t imagine my editor from the publishing company has built up the courage to call on me at the earl’s manor yet.

I continued, “I wonder what’s brought her here all of a sudden? She was

never the type to arrive without a prior arrangement even at my family's house, let alone here."

"I can't say," Lord Maximilian replied. "I didn't ask for any details either, but she did look rather perturbed. She seems not to have brought a lady's maid with her, either. She was standing all by herself in front of the gate, apparently having walked all the way here. She's a baron's daughter, is she not? Walking rather than using a carriage is no trivial matter."

"Oh, indeed. I suppose not." I averted my gaze from my father-in-law, who had spoken with some concern in his voice. Naturally, if one was referring to generally accepted behavior, then it was exactly as he said. However, I knew that these rules did not apply in Julianne's case.

"She seemed too nervous to even call the doorman, but I spoke to her and brought her inside. I've left her in the white drawing room, so you should go there."

"Yes, of course. Thank you for going to all this trouble."

For an earl, he certainly wasn't afraid of doing a job himself, even if it could have been delegated to a servant. He had come here mainly to tell me about this, although, as an aside, he also handed a gift to his son. It was a box of small cakes that he'd received from the university he worked at. Even though his son had grown into a fine military officer, tougher even than he was, in his eyes Lord Simeon was still no more than a cute little lad.

Lord Simeon made a slightly awkward face, but maintained a smile as he accepted the gift, after which I made my way to the small drawing room on my own. On the way, I happened upon Countess Estelle.

"Oh, Marielle, I was just about to look for you. The new dress I commissioned has just arrived. Could you try it on for me?"

Immediately, I began to run away in a great hurry. "I'm sorry, but I have a visitor! That will have to wait!"

"Stop running! It's thoroughly improper behavior!"

How many new dresses was this now? I'd only been married for a month and my walk-in closet was already filled to the brim. She shouted a rebuke after me,

but I sped into the drawing room, closing the door behind me.

This small room was only ever used to receive a small number of guests at a time. Julianne was waiting there on her own.

“Good day, Julianne! It’s been a while, hasn’t it? Are you doing well?”

Having not seen my best friend for a month or so, I gave her an enthusiastic greeting. Julianne, who was huddled up with a look of some agitation, sprang up from her seat.

“Marielle!”

“It’s good to see you. I have a souvenir for you from Enciel Island, so I was planning to go and visit soon. I hope Auntie and Uncle and Isidore are—”

Before I could finish, she rushed over, practically charging toward me. “Marielle, you have to help me! Please, I need you to ask Lord Simeon!”

Her request and her expression were both so alarming that I was left in stunned silence for a moment. Slowly I asked, “Did something happen? Has someone been kidnapped by an evildoer?”

“If only that *had* happened! A kidnapping would be perfect! Honestly, I wish someone would come along right now and take them both away. Could that be arranged? Though I hardly think anyone would want such an utterly charmless middle-aged couple. Better for them to be arrested and thrown in jail.”

I started to wonder if I’d been mistaken in thinking she seemed out of sorts. This was the same old Julianne as always. Her small build and outwardly quiet behavior often led those who didn’t know her to believe she was shy and reserved. However, lurking beneath the surface was her true nature: sharp and scathing.

Even for her, however, these remarks were out of the ordinary. Her parents’ actions did give her plenty to complain about, but suggesting that they should be arrested was a little much.

For now, I did my best to calm her. After making her sit, I asked a servant to summon Lord Simeon, who arrived very promptly. In the presence of a guest, I no longer felt any of my earlier mortification, and was able to look him in the

eye without any problem. He had brought the cakes from his father, and he presented me and Julianne with one each. Presumably, he intended to share the remaining two with his brothers.

Julianne appeared to be in no mood for cake, however, and began speaking the moment he sat down. "Please, Lord Simeon! You must arrest my parents!"

"What on earth is this about? Are your parents involved in some sort of crime?"

"They're not only involved, they're the ringleaders! In fact, they're the root of all evil!"

Lord Simeon looked at me. I returned a similarly bewildered expression.

Her parents are far from perfect, but they're not the sort of people you'd describe as evil ringleaders. What could have happened?

Taking a peaceful approach, Lord Simeon asked, "Could I ask you to explain it all from the beginning? Please try to stay calm and tell us what happened."

He hid the intensity that characterized a blackhearted military officer's questioning, consciously adopting a manner of speaking designed to put others at ease. This seemed to have the desired effect, as Julianne lost some of her fervor. Where she had been leaning forward as if ready to pounce, she sat back and, at my urging, drank a sip of tea.

Now she finally let us hear the story of what happened. Sadly, it was a story that caused us a great deal of consternation.

Chapter Three

It had all begun when Julianne's father, Baron Sorel, had found a suitor to marry her.

"Ordinarily my parents don't have the slightest interest in my comings and goings, but now that my marriage was almost arranged, they suddenly became rather worried. Out of nowhere, Father asked if I was involved with a strange man."

"Out of interest, who was the suitor he found?" I asked.

"Hmm, what was his name? I've quite forgotten. All the commotion that ensued had put him right out of my head. I do recall that he's not a nobleman, but a businessman. Specifically, a loan shark with a good reputation. He's about sixty years old, I believe."

"Oh, that sounds like exactly what you were hoping for!"

"Hold on a moment," Lord Simeon interjected. "It's one thing for parents to arrange a match like that, but why would you be *happy* about it?"

Evidently, he was also too wedded to generally accepted behavior. Julianne shook her head. "Happy? Far from it. I was hoping for a man of at least seventy."

"That's even worse!"

"Though if I marry a man in his seventies, it might be ten years or more before I'm widowed, so my ideal would be eighty."

Lord Simeon cradled his head in his hands for a moment. Then he regained his composure and tried to move on. "In any case, the marriage proposal wasn't the problem, correct?"

Julianne shook her head. "No. I wasn't thrilled about the gentleman's age—he is a little too young—but Father was so enthusiastic that it seemed pointless to object. The proposal itself is much of a muchness; the problem was Father's

accusation.”

Lord Simeon and I exchanged another glance. Sometimes no words are necessary between a husband and wife. I was certain he was thinking the same as me. There was only one “strange man” we knew who was trying to involve himself in Julianne’s life.

“I told Father there was no such man, but he was too suspicious to leave it be. Soon he heard from the servants I was receiving letters on occasion, so he barged into my room and searched until he found them.”

“Oh my,” I replied.

Daughters were commonly treated as property by their fathers. As unforgivable as it might be to search a girl’s room without asking, there was no shortage of fathers who would consider such a thing to be their natural right. Baron Sorel wasn’t a bad person, but he was a little self-centered and lacking in compassion.

“These letters... They were from a gentleman?” I asked.

Julianne’s spirits sank slightly. She looked down and said, “Yes.”

Not just any gentleman, but the “strange man” himself, no doubt.

“But it’s not as though we have a particularly special relationship. It’s just a modest social connection. I met him through you, Marielle.”

In her rush to make excuses, she had let the cat out of the bag. There were *very* few gentlemen she had met through me. Other than Lord Simeon and my editor, there was really only one possibility.

“The letters themselves weren’t all that exciting, either. Once in a while—really only very occasionally—he invited me to go somewhere with him, but I wouldn’t characterize those outings as all that special either. He probably just needed to take a breather and deemed that I would be an ideal companion, since he wouldn’t need to fuss about me all that much.”

“Goodness, it sounds like he put in a surprising amount of effort. Where did you go?”

“The Neighboring Moneylender.”

Lord Simeon interjected again, just as incredulous as before. “What sort of venue has a name like that!?”

I explained that it was a small playhouse in a corner of the theater district. Even amongst all the other low-priced theaters aimed at commoners, it was a third-rate venue, easily classified as the lowest of the low.

“And you young ladies have been to such a cesspit!?”

“Admittedly the plays aren’t especially classy, but they are hugely entertaining,” I replied.

“No wonder you know so many vulgar words. I can only imagine that the subject matter in a theater like that is as coarse as can be. No doubt the audience includes many people of ill repute as well. Two girls from respectable backgrounds should be steering well clear.”

“Don’t worry, we always dress in a manner that avoids drawing any attention.”

“That’s hardly enough! Even if you dress inconspicuously, you’ll still—wait, more importantly, *that* was where His Highness took you!?” He shifted his gaze to Julianne and glared at her.

Fidgeting, she fervently shook her head. “What? No, I... I didn’t say it was His Highness! What does His Highness have to do with any of this!?”

“Stop trying to hide it and tell the truth!” Lord Simeon demanded. “Did His Highness take you to a tawdry playhouse!?”

The “strange man” in Julianne’s orbit—the one who had fallen in love with her and was pathetically, I mean, earnestly trying to win her affections—was in fact the heir to the Lagrangian throne, Prince Severin himself.

He was the same age as Lord Simeon, and both his character and his skills were held in high regard, with the only flaw worth mentioning that he was indeed a tad pathetic. His treatment of me reflected a familial sort of intimacy as well. All in all, he was a kind man and a very fine prince indeed.

They say birds of a feather flock together, and Lord Simeon was not the only Prince Charming in my life with peculiar preferences. His Highness’s looks

competed with Lord Simeon's, and his social position was even higher, so he was the most eligible bachelor in the land and an object of longing for countless fair maidens. Despite this, he still hadn't found a bride. He hated the sort of ostentatious beauties that pursued him relentlessly; rather, he wanted a humble young lady with no interest in the position of crown prince at all. On top of this, he had a taste for strong-willed women.

Most lamentably of all, he seemed to only fall for women who wanted nothing to do with him. Sadly, his success rate had been very poor indeed, and his past was strewn with tragic experiences. He never managed to learn his lesson, and one couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

Recently he had found a new love, and the target of his affections was none other than Julianne. They had happened to meet at the palace when she was there attending a concert held by the queen, and he'd apparently fallen in love at first sight.

I can see why. Her looks are not too ostentatious at first glance, but a closer look reveals how lovely her face really is. She has an aura about her that's somewhat like a baby squirrel. Even fellow girls all think she's very cute indeed. She can be slightly bitter sometimes, but at her core she's kind and intelligent. I'd gladly praise His Highness for his expert eye...if only things were running a little more smoothly.

Unfortunately, the fairy tale had come to a grinding halt. At this point, it looked as though it was not to be.

All that aside, hearing that Julianne had brought his closest friend and peerless master to such an unseemly place had made Lord Simeon very angry. He had abandoned his kind visage and was now interrogating her with the eyes and voice of the Demon Vice Captain.

Julianne, who was not used to this, trembled and turned pale. "But...he was the one who wanted to go there! I tried to convince him otherwise—as you say, it's a rather tawdry place—but he said it sounded like good fun and that he strongly wished for me to take him. That's the truth, I swear it!"

"How did His Highness even know of such a playhouse? Wait... Marielle!?"

I quickly stood, ran around the table and took refuge beside Julianne. She

drew closer to me, and I took her hand before saying my piece. “I was fulfilling His Highness’s wishes as well! He asked me what kinds of places Julianne liked, so I told him a few. That’s all!”

“Why can’t you be more selective with the information you hand out!?”

“It’s quite all right! The troupe leader, Bruno, is a muscleman with a chivalrous streak. If any of the guests start causing trouble, he knocks them out with his fists. The Neighboring Moneylender is a local attraction, I’ll have you know! It’s a theater where anyone can go to see a play and feel perfectly safe.”

“The more I hear about it, the less safe it sounds!”

Suddenly, our argument was interrupted.

“I think you’ve lost the thread of the conversation a little,” said the new voice in a casual tone.

We all turned to look, and there stood Lord Noel, peering in through a crack in the doorway.

“Noel, don’t eavesdrop,” said Lord Simeon pointedly, “especially when we’re having a conversation with a guest.”

“Eavesdropping? Never! Your voices carried into the corridor, that’s all.”

Undaunted, Noel opened the door wider and stepped inside. My cat was at his feet; she ran past him and leapt up into Julianne’s lap.

“Oh, Chouchou!” said Julianne. The cat sat cozily in Julianne’s lap, looking up as if to try and calm her. *Was Chouchou worried that we were having an argument?*

It seemed to work, as Julianne finally smiled as she stroked the cat’s little head.

The anger receded from Lord Simeon as well. He had been leaning forward, but he sat back in his chair again.

Taking a seat beside him, Lord Noel said, “Why must you always jump straight to lectures and accusations, Simeon? If I understood, Julianne’s story was about her father. Why did you start scaring her when you could have just asked why she was here?”

Being admonished by his youngest brother, who was twelve years his junior, left Lord Simeon looking quite uneasy. After a moment's pause, he apologized frankly to Julianne. "Yes, I'm sorry about that. It was quite unreasonable of me to suggest you might hold any blame."

"No apology necessary," Julianne replied.

"I'll have plenty of time to discuss this lowbrow playhouse with Marielle later. Let's continue with the matter at hand."

He glared at me for a moment, but I resolutely ignored him. *Excuse me? I have no more interest in discussing that further than Julianne does, I'll have you know!*

Lord Noel took it upon himself to summarize the key points of the rather disjointed conversation. "In a nutshell, your father rummaged through your room and found letters from His Highness the Crown Prince, yes?"

If he knows that much, he's definitely been eavesdropping! Though he had the face of an angel, he was a little devil in disguise. Lord Simeon scowled at him for a moment, but refrained from interrupting so as to avoid derailing the discussion any further.

"Yes, that's right," said Julianne nervously.

Continuing, Lord Noel asked, "What I want to ask is, why didn't they notice until now? Surely a letter arriving from His Highness would be enough to cause a commotion on its own."

"He was concerned about exactly that, so he sent them using only his initials."

"A secret liaison, then? My, my, what a crafty fellow he is!"

After stuffing his brother's grinning face with a cake, Lord Simeon took the lead again. "And your father found the letters and read their contents?"

"He did. At first he was outraged—he began ranting that I was a disgrace to the family—but when he noticed one of the signatures, his attitude changed rather drastically."

"He signed them using his real name, didn't he?"

"Yes, and when Father saw that signature, he looked through the letters again

and realized they were from the real Prince Severin. Since then, he's been all revelry and merrymaking. The suitor he'd arranged vanished from his thoughts. Instead, he and my mother began to celebrate that His Highness had fallen in love with me. No matter how many times I insisted otherwise, they ignored me, convinced that we'd all but confirmed a secret engagement." She heaved a deep sigh.

I could just picture the scene. It sounded entirely like Julianne's parents. With severely mixed feelings, I interjected, "Well, I suppose you can't blame them."

Most noble families with a daughter of a suitable age dreamed of marrying her off into the royal family. Though we lived in the modern era with a parliament and a legal system, and the country's organizational structure continued to slowly change, the king nonetheless retained a huge amount of power and influence. High-ranking houses were already involved in their own quiet but troublesome battles for supremacy, so their view of marrying into the royal family was somewhat different, but a family as insignificant as House Sorel saw it purely as a notion from a fairy tale. It was no surprise that Julianne's parents had jumped for joy.

"I most certainly *can* and *do* blame them!" she retorted. "If they took even a single moment to think about it properly, they'd realize it's unthinkable. No one from a house like ours would ever receive a marriage proposal from a member of the royal family!"

"His Highness is known for being earnest and sincere, and it's no secret that he's faced difficulties with his romantic endeavors. I'm sure they felt that a man like that wouldn't have simply been toying with you." Hesitating, I looked up at the ceiling. The reason for the baron and baroness's excitement was not a misunderstanding at all, but it was still far too early for them to be reacting like this. I began to connect the dots as to the cause of Julianne's anger. "Would I be right in guessing that they've already started bragging about it?"

"They've been spreading the 'news' far and wide with triumphant smugness. At House Taillon's gathering the other day, they were stating openly that their daughter was to be crown princess! I tried to tell them that there had been absolutely no talk of us marrying, but they didn't listen to a word I said. It looked as though the other guests were highly skeptical, taking it as no more

than drunken rambling, but the social calendar is awfully full this time of year. If they make the same claim to everyone they meet, I dread to think what might happen. That's why I want you to throw them into prison. You *must* prevent them from causing any more trouble with this nonsense. Please, Lord Simeon! Place my parents under arrest!"

This urgent appeal made even Lord Simeon recoil for a moment.

With a groan, I put my hands on my cheeks. "Even if we don't do a thing, it's liable to end in that, isn't it?"

If they continued babbling about this when there had been nothing discussed officially at all, they might face charges of fraud, or even high treason. Finding a way to stop them was a necessity, even if it wasn't by arresting them.

"When will Auntie and Uncle next be attending a function?" I asked.

After thinking for a moment, she replied, "In three days, I believe. Baron Bachelet is holding a ball, and they seem to be aiming for the events with the longest guest lists."

"We received invitations from Baron Bachelet as well. Perhaps I'll talk to my family and ask my mother and father if they'd like to come."

The moment I finished speaking, Lord Noel jumped on the opportunity without a moment's delay. "Oh! I want to go, too!"

Lord Simeon frowned. "Absolutely not."

"But why not?" said Lord Noel. "You'll be busy with work starting tomorrow, so you won't have time to spend all night at a ball."

"It's no place for a child."

"I'm fifteen years old, and turning sixteen this year. You can't treat me like a child forever."

"At fifteen and sixteen, you are still very much a child, I assure you."

However, even at this tone that brooked no argument, the fearless younger brother did not flinch. He shrugged and replied, "Miss Marielle made her debut at age fifteen, didn't she? Incidentally, you were twenty-four at the time—a full-blown adult! And yet you encountered her and fell in love, if I recall. Hold on, if

fifteen is a child then...goodness, that is quite shocking. You fell in love with a child and spent three years watching her wherever you went. My word! I had no idea that my own brother was such a predator!”

Lord Simeon growled and balled his large hands into fists, but Lord Noel nimbly ran away and stood behind me. Wrapping his arms around me, he spoke in an adorably beseeching voice. “Go on, Miss Marielle. Take me with you. I can escort you in place of my brother. What’s wrong with that?”

To think he’s this cunning at age fifteen. It’s clear who’s the real blackhearted rogue here!

I replied, “Honestly, Lord Noel! You must realize that this is a serious situation.”

“I promise I won’t get in your way. Who knows, it might come in handy to have me there. I may be small, but I am still a man.”

“Hmm.” I understood he was eager to have new experiences, and it was impossible to dislike him, but an awkward half-smile formed on my face nonetheless.

While I was musing over what to do, the door suddenly flew open without even a knock.

“Simeon!”

In barged a big dog with golden brown fur—that is to say, the middle Flaubert brother, Lord Adrien.

This caused Lord Simeon to grimace once more. “Adrien, we’re entertaining a guest. Couldn’t you have knocked at the very least?”

“Oh, I’m sorr—wait, this looks like a family affair to me. And how come Noel has a cake and I don’t!?”

“Remind me how old you are?” With a sigh, Lord Simeon passed the remaining cake to Lord Adrien.

After getting a treat from his beloved older brother, the twenty-four-year-old puppy wagged his invisible tail. “Thank you! Actually, you have a visitor as well. I came here to retrieve you.”

“A visitor for me? I see. If you’ll all excuse me, in that case.”

We certainly were popular today. Lord Simeon exited the room, taking Lord Adrien with him. With the fear of fists flying now gone, Lord Noel returned to his seat.

I, meanwhile, gulped down the remainder of my tea and changed the subject to a matter I felt was rather crucial. “We’ll be able to decide how to handle Auntie and Uncle once we’ve assessed the situation, but I’d also like to hear about your feelings.”

When I turned my head to look at her, Julianne’s amber eyes were trembling. She had explained the situation with as many justifications as she could muster, but she hadn’t even remotely touched upon how she herself felt about the prospect of marrying His Highness. From her eyes, which were practically begging me not to dig too deep, I could see that this was quite intentional.

“My feelings? What about them?”

“Now that we’ve reached this point, I should be honest with you. I know you’ve insisted otherwise, but there is a reason why His Highness sent you all those letters—why he’s put so much effort into spending time with you. Even you must have realized that by now. You understand that your father’s glee isn’t *entirely* baseless, don’t you? Please, stop making excuses that ‘he probably just needed to take a breather’ and face the truth. With all that in mind, how do *you* feel about His Highness?”

Julianne’s face grew troubled. She looked like a timid child who had been giving a stern talking-to and couldn’t manage a reply. I knew that wasn’t who she really was, though. Not giving in, I continued.

“It’s rude to pretend you’re not aware of his feelings and leave him without any idea of your own intentions. If someone’s trying to woo you, you have to give them a proper answer. How do you intend to answer His Highness?”

Still silent, Julianne frowned and looked away. After I waited a few moments, she finally replied, sighing as she spoke. “It’s completely impossible.”

“Impossible? What do you mean?”

She turned back to me with a hint of annoyance on her face. “I can’t believe

you have to ask!”

The light hit her amber eyes and they took on a beautiful luster. I’d heard a certain gentleman describe them in effusive terms.

“Bloody hell, I thought her eyes were rather a dark hue, but when the light catches them, they’re like pools of golden liquid! She tends to lower her head, so it’s not often that she graces me with a direct look in my direction, but when I first caught a glimpse of that luster, I jolly well felt as though I was about to kick the bucket.”

There was something so innocent and heartwarming about him finding such pleasure simply in meeting her gaze. It was true that all sorts of obstacles stood between them. As much as I was cheering them on, I couldn’t do so with complete confidence. Still, if there was any way for them to have a happy ending, I wanted it to happen.

“You do realize he’s the crown prince?” said Julianne, speaking in a tone so strong as to be rather harsh. “The heir to the throne. How can a mere baron’s daughter marry a man like that? Perhaps if my father were a man like Baron Bachelet, who has status and a sizable fortune, then it might be possible, but my house is certainly not one that could marry into the royal family. Not only the palace, but the population as a whole would simply never accept it.” She glared at me straight on. Despite the fierceness in her gaze, there was also something heartrending about the way her eyes wavered. “I don’t know what His Highness’s intentions are, but this whole possibility has been a non-starter from the very beginning!”

“That’s still far too evasive for my liking. I was asking about *your* feelings, not what everyone else will think. I want to know how you feel about His Highness. Tell me.”

When I resolutely demanded an answer, Julianne looked down and struggled for words. “Well...you see...”

Lord Noel stayed quiet and watched as well rather than trying to interrupt and provoke her.

I took Julianne’s hand. “Don’t underestimate Agnès Vivier. Do you think you can pull the wool over the eyes of a romance author? I’ve observed countless

people involved in countless love affairs, and besides, we've been friends since you were still wetting the bed. I know you very well indeed, just as you understand me. Put all the complicated realities to one side for now and focus on yourself. You like His Highness as well, don't you? If you found his attention bothersome, you'd have long since pushed him away. You're not the type to politely put up with him just because he's royalty. If your time together was a bore, you'd have made sure he knew it."

Now Julianne fell silent with a conflicted expression. She couldn't say I was wrong, but she couldn't bring herself to confirm that I was right, either. Her inner turmoil was painfully clear.

"The first step is to be honest about your own feelings. Then you need to accept His Highness's feelings, as he deserves. I can't promise that your relationship will be a smooth one, but you should try to be optimistic. It may be difficult, but if you give it your best, you might be surprised. At the very least, he's *far* better than a sixty-year-old loan shark."

"I'd still prefer the loan shark," she retorted.

Smiling, I let go of her hand. *There! That's the real Julianne. Even when she appears distressed and defeated, underneath it all she's a formidable young lady.*

"That's awfully naive of you to say, you know. Even if the man himself is elderly, he'll have plenty of young and healthy relatives. If there's a son or grandson older than you, he might not bequeath you a single algier of his fortune."

"While he's alive, I'll have him write a will that includes me."

"You dummy. Do you think the sort of man who buys a young wife with his money will be generous enough to go along with that? Even if he does, the family will conspire to keep the money for themselves. Still, even if you're driven away and left penniless, you'd be a hypocrite to complain, wouldn't you? You'd also be treating your husband as nothing more than a source of revenue."

When I unflinchingly pointed this out, Julianne was lost for words.

"That's true," said Lord Noel, nodding. "If your aim is to become a widow in

ten years or less, that's exactly what you'd be doing. I wouldn't feel too good about having a wife begging for me to die as soon as possible."

I beamed at him. "Indeed! What a horrible wife."

Julianne said nothing in return; she merely pouted. Lord Noel and I both giggled.

Chouchou was sprawled out in Julianne's lap, looking very cozy. I brushed her every day, so I knew her fur was extremely soft to the touch. Julianne stroked the cat several times. *The affection of a warm and soft creature is perfect for soothing the heart.*

Softening my tone slightly, I said, "Don't insist that your ideal life is one you read about in a story somewhere. Think properly about your future. If you really did marry an old man, I'm sure you'd be racked with guilt. You're too kind a person to be so mercenary."

I didn't want to apply too much pressure. Julianne wasn't someone who couldn't be reasoned with, so this would hopefully be enough. She still hadn't given me a direct answer, but I was certain she'd be thinking it over, at least.

As such, I stopped interrogating her and changed to a more pleasant topic. It had been some time since we'd seen one another, so there were plenty of things I wanted to tell her and ask her about.

We began to share the details of our recent activities, and Julianne appeared to relax. "Pirates? Covert operatives? Why do the most ridiculous incidents always happen wherever you go?"

"Are you suggesting it was my fault? If anyone's to blame, it's Lord Simeon. It was a matter concerning House Flaubert, after all."

"What a mean thing to say about my brother," Lord Noel exclaimed. "Can't we say it was the Republic of Orta's fault?"

"Well, that's certainly true. Lord Simeon had a secret plan in mind right from the very start, though!"

"That was purely by chance," said Lord Simeon, returning just as I became my usual impassioned self. "In any case, you shouldn't be spreading too many

details about it.” He turned an accusatory gaze on me, as if reprimanding a child, then gave a light apology for having left earlier. “I’m terribly sorry for leaving in the middle of our conversation. It seems as though you’re feeling less upset about the situation.”

“Yes, I suppose,” Julianne replied. “Has your guest left already?”

Out in the corridor, there were sounds hinting at someone nearby. I wondered if it was Lord Adrien again, but Lord Simeon’s awkward expression suggested it might be someone quite different.

Lord Simeon looked carefully at Julianne, as if confirming that she was calm enough. After a moment’s hesitation, he cautiously began, “Miss Julianne, there’s someone here who would like to meet with you.”

“Me?”

Julianne’s surprise was justified, as she was currently not even at her own home. However, with the situation in mind, it was no surprise when the calm left her and fear dawned on her face again.

“Who is it? Did my parents barge in uninvited? Or has word of this already reached the palace? Has someone come to censure me?”

With a faint smile, Lord Simeon tried to reassure her. “No, neither of those. You needn’t worry—everything’s fine. Only, you are right about word reaching the palace. My visitor heard about all this and decided he couldn’t simply leave things be, so he hurriedly set out to talk to me about it. However, when he learned that you happened to be here, he became very eager to see you.”

His phrasing made it very clear who it was. Julianne’s eyes widened. She opened her mouth, but before any words came out, she suddenly froze.

After turning on the spot to look, Lord Simeon drew back from the doorway to make space.

Powerful, stately footsteps entered the room. I stood respectfully, and Lord Noel did the same. No doubt Julianne thought about doing so as well, but she was unable to move a muscle. She simply stared at the man approaching.

He looked back at her as well. In fact, from the moment he appeared, he

looked only at Julianne. His dark eyes, characteristic of the royal bloodline, were focused on her and her alone; the rest of us did not register at all.

He strode without any hesitation and stopped just in front of Julianne. His expression suggested he was unsure how to begin. Julianne remained seated, and the two of them silently stared at each other for a moment.

At last, he kneeled down. “Miss Julianne, I’ve made a right hash of things, and it’s put you in hot water, to say the least. First and foremost, I ask you to please accept my sincere apologies.”

With no concern for their great difference in status, he looked up at her from his position on the floor. The only people he should ever have shown this degree of deference to were his parents, His Majesty the King and Her Majesty the Queen. Staunchly ignoring such conventions, His Highness the Crown Prince, heir to the throne of the Kingdom of Lagrange, had put a hand on his heart and issued a straightforward apology.

Julianne was still unable to move. She wasn’t merely frozen, she was paralyzed with fear.



Chapter Four

A social gathering is the perfect way to spend a pleasant evening in early summer. In the noble district, there was some function or other being held every single night. Social butterflies who simply *had* to go to Earl Such-and-Such's manor one night and Baron So-and-So's the next found themselves rather busy.

Baron Bachelet's ball was a crowded affair, with a huge number of invited guests. Though "baron" is a low rank, the balance of power amongst noblemen can't be measured by ranks alone; the baron was a wealthy man with a position of responsibility in the Ministry of Finance, so he had both status and influence, not to mention a vast sphere of social connections.

This was also why he had caught the attention of a certain spy from another country—one who had pretended to be a mysterious thief. As part of the spy's diversionary tactics, he had stolen a precious family treasure from the baron.

He never did get that sword back. Poor thing.

The baron lived in a different world than House Sorel—and House Clarac, of course. His vast garden was lit up with so many lamps that the atmosphere felt somehow mystical, while the large reception hall rising from it shone as brightly as daylight. It was an opulent affair that showcased the baron's wealth and influence.

As I stood alone in a corner, I heard a slightly pompous voice behind me. "Oho, what a beautiful flower I find blooming here. Might I ask your name?"

The moment I turned around, the man who had spoken furrowed his brow in confusion. Most likely, he'd assumed that since I was wearing a beautiful dress, I myself must be a beauty. Ten gentlemen had already come and gone, all having approached, been let down, then speedily made their escape.

"Oh, well," he began, hesitating, "what house do you hail from, young lady? If you don't mind, I would gladly exchange a few words with you."

Number eleven was more tenacious than the others. Even after seeing my face, he hadn't immediately cried, "Next!" in his mind. However, before I could answer, an imposing figure arrived at my side.

"What exactly are your intentions with my wife?"

This frigid voice made the man before me tense up immediately. He anxiously looked me up and down. "You? You're...the wife of Earl Flaubert's... But, how can that...? I never thought...!"

Finally aware of who I was, the man now departed like all the others.

"Honestly, I leave you alone for one moment," said Lord Simeon with more than a touch of irritation.

I turned to him and laughed at his pouting face. "Most of them change their minds as soon as they see my face."

"That annoys me in and of itself."

He wrapped an arm around my waist, embracing me to clearly express that I was already spoken for and, thus, no unaccompanied men should start talking to me.

"Are you tired at all?" he asked.

"No, I'm quite all right. How about you, Lord Simeon? You still have to work tomorrow. Are you sure you can spare the time to be here?"

"I can't stay especially late, but it's not such a problem to spend a couple of hours. After what I've just seen, you definitely mustn't go out on your own, do you understand?"

Hearing him say this so gravely made me laugh again. Countess Estelle was doing her best to make her plain daughter-in-law appear at least somewhat pretty, but however she dressed me up, it wouldn't change my face. I hadn't put on makeup that constituted a full-fledged disguise, so there was no need for such overprotective worrying.

Three days after Julianne's visit, Baron and Baroness Sorel were attending this ball, just as she had predicted. I had come as well, but in the end, Lord Simeon was serving as my escort; he had said that he wanted to see the situation at

hand with his own eyes. Though Lord Noel had sulked, he could do nothing about it.

“The Sorels have split up and begun to share their news,” said Lord Simeon, who had made a circuit of the venue. Since moving swiftly was rather a struggle for me right now, he had gone scouting on his own.

My rose-colored dress, which Countess Estelle had lauded as the latest fashion, incorporated ample quantities of lace and was decorated with sweet little ribbons. Admittedly, it looked incredible, but it was extremely difficult to walk in. Its slender silhouette ran along the contours of the body, and the cylindrical skirt, which had neither a crinoline or a petticoat underneath, was the dress’s key feature. Not only did it restrict my legs, it also had a long train that I had to drag behind me. I couldn’t walk in a broad stride, let alone run.

When I complained about this, Countess Estelle had chided me, saying that a lady didn’t need to walk quickly. To me, it felt less like a fine gown and more like an elaborate set of restraints. *Imagine if a fire broke out! I’d never manage to escape in time!*

Not too many people were wearing this sort of design yet, so I stood out, just as my mother-in-law had intended. That was why so many men were approaching me. It wasn’t a very practical style, though, so I had the sense that it would become widespread solely as a talking point, not as a common fashion choice.

“They’ve split up?” I replied. “So Auntie and Uncle are in two different places right now?”

“Yes. They’re each talking to different circles of acquaintances. I must say, taking such a step makes their behavior feel planned rather than accidental.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

I put my closed fan up to my mouth and took a short breath. If there had been no more to their boasting than the thrill of sharing their excitement, they would probably have stayed together. Going out of their way to split up after arriving as a couple suggested they weren’t merely innocent parties getting swept up in the moment.

I added, “They didn’t exactly take my parents’ comments with good grace, either.”

After receiving word from me about the situation, my mother and father had gone to visit House Sorel straight away. My mother and Baroness Sorel are first cousins, a relationship that allows for rather frank discussion. With my father’s help, she tried to persuade them that this wasn’t a matter that should be mentioned publicly yet, and that they should remain quiet until there was an official announcement from the palace.

However, the Sorels had refused to listen. Their reaction had been along the lines of: “Look at you, always acting so high and mighty. Just because you’re jealous doesn’t mean you have to tell me off like I’m a foolish child. One day, we’ll be mother-in-law and father-in-law to the king. Do you think just because you’re related to us, we’ll still accept this sort of treatment?” And so on, and so forth.

Other comments had included: “I understand why it bothers you. When little Marielle married into an earldom, you were all smiles, weren’t you? You thought you’d beaten us for good. You never dreamed that the tables would be turned, and Julianne would marry someone even more impressive. It must make you want to die! How terribly sad for you!”

Unsurprisingly, this left both my mother and father at the end of their tether.

Hearing this put the pieces into place for me. I understood exactly why the Sorels were so eager to boast about this.

It didn’t make them bad people. Ever since we were children, Julianne and I had frequently visited each other’s houses, which of course meant we saw a lot of each other’s families. My auntie, Baroness Sorel, treated me kindly, and I had no particular negative memories of either of them. They had their problems, definitely, but as relatives go, I always found them to be fairly normal.

However, since my engagement to Lord Simeon, it was undeniable that relations between our parents had grown a tiny bit frosty. The Sorels were vain and eager to show off at any opportunity, so it seemed to rub them the wrong way that I had married into such a high-ranking family. My parents weren’t braggarts, and in any case, the large gap in status between Lord Simeon’s house

and ours had meant we were subjected to a great deal of ridicule and backbiting, so they hadn't really been allowed to feel cocky and arrogant about it. Nonetheless, from the Sorels' perspective, it was a source of great envy. There had been nothing they could do except live with their frustration, but when they found Julianne's correspondence with His Highness, it had been a light in the darkness—a chance to get their own back.

Plenty of people behaved this way; it was the sort of petty drama seen every day across high society. Still, I could have done without being subjected to it by my own relatives. *Why do money and status have to be so important to them? Why can't they just be pleasant, easygoing people, and be proud of that instead?*

"They should be able to guess what would happen if they continue down this path," said Lord Simeon. "Haven't they thought about it at all? It's utterly baffling."

"I suspect they *have* thought about it, and that's exactly why they're doing it. They probably believe it will remove the obstacles in their path. They're being as forthright as they can *because* it's not official yet."

"Imbeciles," he huffed, a dismissive judgment in one word. "As a plan, that's naive beyond all words. His Highness is already determined to see this through, but they could ruin it all. His and Her Majesty will deem House Sorel unfit to marry into the royal family before they even look at Miss Julianne herself."

He was exactly right. I'd been worried about the same thing.

My parents, too, had no objection to the match. They had been trying to help, in fact, by giving sensible advice. Alas, there was no convincing the Sorels right now. They took all words of caution as an affront—as an expression of jealousy and nothing more.

"They've always had a tendency to get an idea into their heads and never let it go. I can see why Julianne was asking for such strong measures to be taken."

"Perhaps arresting them really is the only way. It's not only scandalous, but likely to hinder all chances of the marriage taking place."

"Let's not forget that Julianne hasn't actually said yes," I cautioned.

For in fact, his Highness didn't just have Julianne's parents to contend with, but the girl herself. Even now that he'd made his intentions clear, she hadn't yet agreed to marry him.

Three days earlier, when His Highness had coincidentally met her at the Flaubert manor, he had proposed to her there and then. Before that, however, his first words had been an apology.

"Miss Julianne, I've made a right hash of things, and it's put you in hot water, to say the least. First and foremost, I ask you to please accept my sincere apologies."

His tone held no sign of anger or any suggestion that he blamed her. The same kind and genuine prince as ever, he looked at Julianne with great consideration toward her.

Julianne, who had been sitting there in a stunned silence, suddenly realized that the crown prince was on his knees issuing an apology. She stood up in a panic. "Stop this, Your Highness, I beg of you! You needn't apologize. I should be the one apologizing to you, given the thoroughly disrespectful behavior of my foolish parents. I've been plagued with guilt and embarrassment, wondering how I can possibly beg your forgiveness. I am truly, truly sorry!"

"You haven't done a thing worthy of the slightest smidgen of blame. I knew that such an outcome might be in the cards, yet I failed to take proper measures. Besides, it is true that I secretly wooed an unmarried young lady without her parents' express permission. If I were a man without such high status, your parents would surely have been outraged. No denying that, eh?"

His Highness took her hand, but her expression remained mortified. "Your Highness, please, you must stand up. I can't bear to hear you suggest any such thing."

"I fear I must also apologize for failing to express myself clearly until now. My vagueness no doubt left you in rather a spot of bother. You can't have had the faintest notion of how to respond."

"No, that's not... You must..."

She shook her head, her voice increasingly tearful. The sight of her like this assuredly made the good-natured prince feel even more helpless. He'd been too reticent so far, and if he didn't take the next step, the relationship would never proceed past this point.

Lord Adrien and Lord Noel were made to leave, with only the four of us remaining in the drawing room. From a glance at Lord Simeon, it was clear he had no intention of interrupting. He waited with a calm expression. I, too, simply watched the events unfold, confident that His Highness would pull through.

His Highness ignored my existence completely, not looking my way even once, but that suited me just fine. He had more important things to focus on, in any case. *Yes, I'll become part of the furniture—disappear into thin air. That is my specialty, after all. I'm here, cheering you on from the shadows, so make the most of this chance!*

Our trust and expectations were not betrayed. His Highness hesitated no longer, but finally spoke those all-important words.

"There's a very particular reason I wished to meet with you today. Our relationship cannot continue in the manner it has thus far, nor do I wish it to. The question I've longed to ask you all along is...will you be my princess? If I could spend all my days with you by my side, it would make me the happiest chap in the world."

His dark eyes gazed directly into hers, imploring her to accept his earnest feelings. No one could have witnessed this scene and believed he was half-serious or in some way toying with her.

Honestly, rather than being moved, I was internally rolling my eyes at how long this had taken. It had been months since he had fallen in love with her, and only now was he telling her so. Though this was somewhat inevitable given his position and his past experiences, it still amounted to a dashing attractive prince—one turning twenty-eight this year, no less—approaching matters of the heart with all the skill and grace of a clumsy little boy. With all the complaining we'd been subjected to in the meantime, I occasionally felt a little hard done by.

Hearing him say it was a huge relief, anyway. Still, this wasn't enough for a happily ever after. The lady he had just proposed to was Julianne, and she was anything but a typical fairytale princess. It would take more than this to convince her.

"I refuse."

As if all her earlier discomfiture had been a lie, she replied without a moment's pause—and without a shred of mercy. Her rejection was so stark that His Highness lost balance for a moment.

He held on, however. Keeping himself steady, he lifted his head again. He kept going, fervent in his determination to win her over.

"Yes, well, I understand why you're hesitant. Indubitably, it won't be easy. I don't see any reason to deem it completely impossible, however. My parents have not specified any conditions pertaining to status or rank. There have even been past kings who took commoners for their wives. Why, the difference in our backgrounds is no hindrance at all."

"Please don't simply assume that I'd say yes if not for that. The issues are more fundamental than any talk of 'conditions.'" When push came to shove, my sharp-tongued friend didn't hold back even when talking to royalty. Her true nature came to the fore, leaving the illusion of a sweet and docile girl behind.

"You said 'all along,' but it's been less than half a year since I met you, hasn't it? You suggest that I'm 'hesitant,' but it's more accurate to say that I haven't even been thinking of you as a potential lover."

Being skewered through the vital organs so ruthlessly, His Highness lost his footing again. *Maybe this time she'll have defeated him? He can hardly deny anything she's just said, so I can't imagine what he'd say as a rebuttal.*

However, His Highness pulled himself together once more, persistent to the last. After his many failed attempts at romance, it seemed he was headstrong enough to face adversity without backing down. This would not be enough to make him crumble.

In that respect, he was far stronger than Lord Simeon. The latter didn't have much experience of failure, so he had a tendency to be surprisingly weak when

encountering setbacks. Whenever he had failed or embarrassed himself in front of me, it had left him so dispirited that he had struggled to recover. He was also a fine target for a certain thief's relentless teasing. Sometimes the most brilliant people can be surprisingly fragile, and he was the quintessential example of that.

That's why I'm building up his tolerance. I have to teach him that he can't rely on everything going his way just because he takes a deadly serious approach and applies logic to every situation. I'm not just making excuses for my own reckless behavior! Honestly, I'm not!

"Oh, well, yes, you're quite right. There's something else I should have said to you before all that. Miss Julianne, since the moment I first met you, you have charmed me and captured my very heart. I would dearly love for you to be my wife."

"I refuse."

With three rejections under his belt now, I began to feel sorry for His Highness. *Maybe I should consider stepping in to help after all?*

"Love at first sight is no more than a subjective assumption," she continued. "How can you say you love someone without knowing anything about them? You can't expect agreement when you're effectively ignoring my existence as a unique individual."

Her words may seem cruel, but perhaps he'll see the underlying meaning. She's afraid that if he knew her true nature, he'd never have said he wanted to be with her.

"I can scarcely even imagine what you see in me, Your Highness. I'm not a great beauty, and nothing about me particularly stands out. I'm not even a raving eccentric like Marielle."

Erm, excuse me? Why am I suddenly your point of reference—and why do you have to phrase it like that!? I was about to protest, but Lord Simeon instantly held me back with a hand over my mouth.

"Marielle holds no appeal to me, I promise you," His Highness replied. "Being friends with her is quite enough. No one but Simeon could marry *that* little

blighter.”

How dare you, Your Highness! Who says I'd ever want to marry you to begin with! Ugh, I don't deny I'm a little unusual, but don't you think that's rather a cruel way of putting it? It's no way to treat me after all the help I've provided!

To prevent me from leaping up and giving him a piece of my mind, Lord Simeon tightly wrapped his arms around me. Then, in a lurid voice, he whispered in my ear, “There’s nothing wrong with me being the only one to marry you. I can finally call you my wife and touch you without worrying what anyone else might think. Don’t tell me you wish another man was in love with you.”

My whole body trembled violently. In an instant, I felt myself grow weak. “You know that’s not how I feel. You’re the only one I look at in such a manner, Lord Simeon. I am your wife and yours alone.”

“That’s exactly how I want it. You should look only at me. You don’t need anyone else. I don’t demand anyone but you, either.”

“Oh, Lord Simeon!”

“Stop it, the pair of you! I don’t need you fawning over each other when I’m trying to lay my heart bare!”

Finally noticing, His Highness turned to glare at us. *Bah, if you're that frustrated, focus your efforts on winning over Julianne!*

Julianne proceeded, “I may not be as odd as Marielle, but I have qualities of my own that make me unsuitable as a wife. I have...unusual interests.”

“I know all about them,” he replied with a stiff nod, seeing through her ambiguous words. “If this is about the stories you like, I’ve known about that from the very start. From the very day we met, I’ll have you know.”

Indeed, it was not a glass slipper she had dropped, but something far less traditional—a tale of secret romance between two beautiful young men.

“I wanted to know what made you tick, so I had Marielle tell me all she could, then embarked on a reading adventure of my own. I simply had to know what it was about these stories that inspires you, not to mention what sort of a

romance you might be seeking. I read every one of those books I could get my hands on.”

After a moment’s pause, she replied, “That’s not enough to truly understand, though. I doubt a gentleman could ever read them through the same eyes that I do.”

Unable to deny it, His Highness nodded. “Indeed.”

As admirable as his efforts had been when others would have simply mocked her hobby as a foolish trifle, it was impossible to imagine His Highness ever sensing the same sort of thrill as Julianne while reading them. I watched with fear, suspecting this might finally be the end, but then His Highness went on.

“I’m not of the homosexual persuasion myself, so I can’t identify with a romance between two men. I can’t say I have any intention to criticize such men or look down upon them, but I, personally, can be rather confident that I’ll never fall in love with a man. As splendid as the stories might be, I don’t have an empathetic response to the relationships themselves.”

Julianne looked back at him, but didn’t interrupt.

“I will say that among those stories, there were no small number where the depiction of both parties as men seemed only superficial, and in fact it felt very much as though one of the fellows was written as a woman. It made me wonder why it made a difference—why the story wasn’t simply written as a male-female romance. I’ve heard that the readers are mostly women. Shouldn’t they be the ones *least* able to relate to a story about two chaps? And yet, when I mulled over why women like such stories, and why it matters that they’re both men, I found a way to make sense of it. If women like stories about male-male romance, what’s the opposite of that? Are there stories about love affairs between two women, I asked myself?”

Taken aback as she realized what he was saying, Julianne’s eyes widened as she gasped in surprise. It was quite a shock to me as well; I suddenly sat up straight.

“I looked into it and learned that such books do indeed exist. Plenty of them—quite unlike those aimed at women, I must say—indulge in lecherous content with no real thought behind it. That said, there are plenty depicting pure

romance as well. Many of those are written by female authors, too.”

“Did you...read those?” Hope welled up in Julianne’s voice. She probably wasn’t even conscious of the huge change in her attitude toward him. When His Highness nodded, Julianne gazed at him eagerly.

“I daresay I did. All the ones I could find, both lewd and innocent. I found that the ones by female authors did a more thorough job of depicting those heartfelt connections.”

“And...what did you think of them?”

Her voice trembled, but no longer with fear or unease. Instead, her eyes glimmered with anticipation she couldn’t contain. Struck by their full golden luster, His Highness gave his answer.

“They were jolly good. I felt my heart quicken.”

Julianne’s hand shifted. He had been holding onto it, but so far this had not been reciprocated. Now, for the first time, she grasped his in return. They looked fixedly into each other’s eyes, hand in hand.

“Just as I’m not homosexual, I don’t desire that in a woman. What I want is a lovely lady who’s interested in me. Putting all that aside, however, those books gave me a different kind of thrill. There was something ever so good, ever so much *fun* about them. The illustrations of women getting frisky with one another were rather appealing, too. Without disparaging any real people who have such predilections, I saw this as something entirely separate from reality. These stories are pure make-believe, and I acknowledge that, but they thrilled me regardless. No, perhaps they thrilled me *because* they’re pure make-believe. How can I possibly describe the feelings these couples inspired in me? Deep inside my soul, I found myself... I found myself...”

“Fanboying?”

“Shut up, Marielle. But...yes, I see now. So when you prattle on about ‘fangirling,’ that’s the sort of feeling you’re referring to. In that case, I’ll say it with pride: I found myself fanboying over these stories. I *understood*, Julianne. I realized that this must be the kind of enjoyment you desire from your favorite books.”

“Your Highness!” Overcome with emotion, Julianne broke out into a joyful smile. Her cheeks took on a deep, rosy hue.

This touched me on a fundamental level as well. *To think that His Highness could come to appreciate what it is to feel that fire burning deep in his soul! He’s not only tolerantly accepting it, he’s actually been able to share in that exhilaration, to see the world through that same lens. A kindred spirit has been born today. We have witnessed a miracle!*

Only one person present had a mournful expression. “You too, Your Highness?”

Lord Simeon appeared not to be celebrating his master having his eyes opened to a whole new world. *I’ll have to recommend some books to my husband as well. My word, I hadn’t thought of this method. What an oversight! I’m impressed with His Highness for taking this route, as well. I’m sure it held vastly more power of persuasion than explaining with words alone. I’ll definitely have to try it with Lord Simeon.*

Within moments, His Highness stood up and went to embrace her. Noticing his intention, Julianne panicked and brushed his hands away. “Yes, well, I’m glad you’ve understood my hobby. That makes me very happy indeed. Even so...”

“I know plenty more about you besides. I’ve learned that you’re a terribly strong and caring person.” His Highness wasn’t about to let Julianne go when he was so close. His powerful gaze was filled with self-confidence. “For years, you’ve supported your family with that slender frame of yours. With your parents’ complete lack of advance planning ability, you’ve sustained your family instead. Isn’t that right?”

“What? How do you...?”

“I gather that House Sorel’s financial situation has been rather precarious due to your father and mother’s taste for the extravagant. Not only have they been wasteful, but they’ve also made poor investments. You’ve held them back with warnings and kept them from economic collapse even when it brought their ire down on you. Your worthy efforts deserve every ounce of my esteem.”

This time she turned red. There was a trembling in her eyes, and a hint of

discomfort, as he mentioned these private details that she'd have preferred no one else to know about. Without even a word, her question to him was clear: *How do you know that?*

A wry smile formed on his lips. "Frightfully sorry. My marriage is more than just an individual concern, you see. It's a matter of king and country, so I couldn't push on with it based on my feelings alone."

He didn't state it outright, but the implication was that he had arranged an investigation into her personal history.

Julianne wore a mixed expression. There had probably been no avoiding this. His Highness's wife would be queen one day, so no one whose background painted them in a dubious light would be seen as suitable. Love wasn't enough. Such an investigation would probably have been carried out even if he had insisted otherwise.

I was sure that Julianne understood this, but that didn't mean she was happy about having her life scrutinized without her knowledge. Seeing her troubled response, His Highness began to apologize repeatedly.

Lowering her gaze a fraction, she interrupted, "No, there's nothing to worry about. I understand that it's a matter of course. Only, if you went to such lengths, you must have realized the truth about House Sorel. We're a noble house in name only. We just barely manage to keep up appearances, but in order to spare the wages, we've dismissed even our butler. Now we only have two servants left in our employ."

Lord Simeon glanced at me, and I gave a small, silent nod. That was the reason why Julianne had come here alone and on foot. She didn't have a lady's maid to bring with her, and the carriage was only used when the baron and baroness were going out. If it was a long distance she took a fiacre, and if it wasn't too far, she walked. That was how Julianne lived.

"The reason my parents are so jubilant about the prospect of this marriage is because they want the money and influence that will come with it. What does that say about them? About me? In no way, shape, or form am I a suitable match for you, Your Highness." She hung her head.

"Miss Julianne," he said, leaning in and putting his hands on her cheeks.

When he pulled her head up to look at him, she visibly lost her presence of mind at the handsome face now right in front of hers. *Yes, I can understand that feeling all too well. Seeing that sort of beauty at such close range can make your heart stop beating!*

“There are ways to solve those sorts of problems. There is absolutely nothing to worry about on that front. What I’m far more concerned about is how you feel about me. Not the reasons you have to refuse me, but whether you actually want to be with me or not. If you honestly have no interest, if you don’t see me as a romantic prospect at all, then I’ll have no choice but to give up. However, I can’t help noticing that you’ve said no such thing. You’ve never given me any sense that you disliked me. Perhaps it’s a tad conceited on my part, but you’ll forgive me for retaining my optimism.”

In a flash, her cheeks turned red. It was clear to all present that it was for a very different reason this time than a moment ago.

He’s right, of course. She’s given countless reasons and justifications, but there’s a magical incantation that would be far more effective than all of those. She could say, “I have absolutely no interest in you.” Why hasn’t she done so? I’m sure it’s not that she can’t bring herself to say it, but that she never had any thought of it to begin with.

Despite all her objections, she couldn’t hide it any longer. It looked as though His Highness had realized it himself. However pathetic he could be, perhaps he really was a capable adult after all.

“When the servants were reduced in number and couldn’t attend to everything, you helped instead and kept your family’s affairs in order. While you were mending your old dresses and reusing them in as many combinations as you could, you worked hard to ensure that your younger brother never wanted for a thing. Is it so strange that I’d have a positive view of such a person? Do you truly think it’s based on nothing but blind assumptions? I’ve been unlucky in love many times, but this time I can declare with confidence that I hold you in the highest regard. Your strength and compassion are second to none, and I thank God for giving me the chance to meet such an incredible woman.”

He stroked her hand lovingly. No doubt he had long since noticed the

scratches and calluses that no ordinary young noblewoman should have. Knowing the cause of them, he didn't mock her as wretched and unfit to be called a noble, nor did he dismiss her as too far beneath him to pursue. Instead, it made him want her even more.

Surely this had to finally touch Julianne's heart? He had expressed his deepest respect for the great efforts she went to in her trying circumstances, and he had done so with total sincerity.

Though she didn't say a word, as she looked back at His Highness, droplets began to spill down her face. He embraced her gently; she did not fight him any further, she simply cried in his arms. The sobbing grew audible, but there was no cause for concern. I knew that these weren't tears of sadness.

This was the first time anyone outside of her family had shown her such great understanding. I could scarcely imagine how happy she was—how comforted she felt. There was no way she could continue to suggest he was only judging her superficially or some such. His Highness had looked at her properly and was thoroughly convinced.

“Allow me to ask you one more time. Please, will you be my wife?”

In his gentle arms, she no longer had any will to oppose these sweet words. However, she looked down awkwardly and answered in a quiet voice, “First, the problems need to be resolved. No matter how much you insist everything will be fine, it doesn't mean others will agree. Once you're certain that the king and queen have approved of me, and there truly are no obstacles remaining, please ask me again. Until then, I can't give you a reply.”

My friend certainly can be tricky to deal with! Practical to the very last, Julianne didn't let herself be drawn in by the sentiment of the moment.

His Highness's smile was somewhat strained, but he appeared to understand the wisdom of this response. He nodded and said, “I understand. I'll take responsibility for persuading my parents. I have every confidence that they'll approve. Then, once everything's fine and dandy, I'll propose to you again. When it comes to that, you'll give me a clear answer, yes?”

“I will.”

Lord Simeon and I exchanged a look, both of us laughing, half joyous and half worried.

Why do their lives have to be so complicated! Still, I suppose that's the nature of a prince's existence. It's never going to be anything like a fairy tale.

While the immediate outcome was relatively happy, the real trouble was only just beginning. I remained deeply unsure as to whether His Highness would truly be able to gain the king and queen's approval.

Given that they'd even considered me as an option at one point, it was possible that they'd be lenient enough to permit a marriage to Julianne. The real problem was, indeed, the kerfuffle being caused by Baron and Baroness Sorel. Just as Lord Simeon had suggested, there was a risk that their behavior would be enough to rule out the possibility.

It felt imperative that we do something here and now, at the ball. As I gazed out upon the many guests dancing in fabulous outfits, I made a suggestion to my husband.

"Couldn't *you* apply some pressure to Auntie and Uncle? They weren't willing to listen to my parents, but if you spoke to them, they'd have to at least listen politely and give you a fair hearing."

The dancing stopped for a moment and the players began a new tune. It was one I rather liked. *I do wish I could dance with Lord Simeon, but I doubt I could manage it in this dress. I'm guaranteed to step on the train and trip myself up. Besides, this is no time for dancing.*

He replied, "Hmm, I can see what you mean. I don't know if they'll really take in anything I say, but it's worth the attempt."

Though he didn't look entirely convinced, he had agreed with me nonetheless. "You're our only hope," I said. "Give them the full impact of the Demon Vice Captain and make their blood run cold."

"I fear that may be a step too far."

"No! This is the time for the brutal, blackhearted military officer to shine! Send them running home with their tails between their legs. Make them

tremble with fear down to their very bones so they won't even show their faces in public again for a while."

"Am I really as terrifying as that!?"

"Of course. Gorillas are strong and imposing creatures."

"Again, where did this gorilla business come from!?"

Suddenly, I heard a man burst into laughter behind us. Lord Simeon and I both froze and looked at each other for a moment with serious expressions, then turned to look.

Nearby stood a gentleman with magnificent golden hair that shone in the light of the chandeliers. Fighting to stifle his chuckles, he said, "I see married life has done nothing to change you two. No one could ever get bored of watching you, I swear."

His stylish, high-class clothes suited him to perfection, and his hair fell over his shoulders in light curls. His dark skin hinted at sunny southern climes, and his face was a picture of allure.

Attracting stares from all the women around us, this very distinctive man walked over with a drink in his hand and gave us a friendly greeting. "Good evening! How lovely to see you both again."

The ambassador from Easdale, the land to the west, was as dazzlingly good-looking as ever tonight.

Chapter Five

I moved away from Lord Simeon and gave the new arrival a curtsy. “Good day, Ambassador Nigel. You’re looking fabulous as usual.”

“Why, thank you. You’re looking beautiful as well. That dress really suits you, you know. The way the train flows elegantly behind you makes you look like a mermaid. Such a lovely effect!”

The man had the blood of two countries’ royal families: those of Shulk, to the south, and Easdale, to the west. As befitting such a noble background, he had a proud air about him. However, he was friendly and good-humored by nature, and a bit of a hedonist who liked to enjoy himself. Just now, he had effortlessly reeled off a line that he most certainly should not have felt comfortable uttering in front of Lord Simeon.

He’s as much of a playboy as ever, I see. Already his flattery of me is starting to make my husband a tiny bit sullen...

Turning to Lord Simeon, he asked, “So, Vice Captain, how are you enjoying your marriage to your cute little wife? It must be ever so much fun. I’m quite jealous.”

“If you would stop courting every lady in the city and settle down, perhaps you could enjoy a similar lifestyle,” he answered in a standoffish manner. Lord Simeon did have a positive view of Ambassador Nigel, but he evidently wasn’t happy about being teased.

However, the ambassador showed no sign of taking any offense at this curt attitude. Rather, he seemed amused. He replied, “Yes, I suppose. If only I could meet a lady who was as much fun as your wife. It’s as though the adventures seek her out on purpose. Recently it was pirates, I hear?”

“You heard wrong,” said Lord Simeon flatly. Then he cleared his throat and continued, “I can only surmise that Duke Shannon’s Knights of the Rose have their own independent intelligence network. That incident hasn’t been

publicized at all, so I'm unclear as to how you heard about it otherwise."

The ambassador's grin grew even wider. Although his outward appearance was very much that of a handsome, refined nobleman, this man was secretly a gorilla as well. He was the nephew of the powerful Duke Shannon and a key figure in the duke's personal order of knights. Now, having been granted the title of "ambassador," he was devoting all his time to going on dates with noblewomen—and yet, despite appearances, he might in fact be even mightier than Lord Simeon.

"I am forced to do some work on occasion, you know. If I don't, a particular underling of mine is certain to strangle me to death. Actually, the intelligence network you've mentioned did uncover one matter that I found rather intriguing. Would you like to hear about it?"

"Is it related to His Highness's romantic troubles?" Lord Simeon replied. "If so, I'm not sure you need to expend the effort."

"It is rather an intriguing development, isn't it? Romance between royalty and a lady of far lower rank. It's like something out of a novel. I'm all in favor, I must say! However, my information concerns an eastern beauty and a nefarious plot she has brewing. She may have backed down once after you outwitted her so handily, but that can only have intensified her grudge and prompted her to lick her wounds and try to meddle once again. Perhaps you had better take preventative measures to ensure she doesn't boorishly interfere in your master's good fortune."

These words, full of deeper meaning, made Lord Simeon's face tighten. Ambassador Nigel's honey-colored eyes, too, held a glint of shrewdness amid his smile.

After thinking for a brief moment, Lord Simeon turned to me. "Marielle, I'm terribly sorry, but would you mind leaving us alone for now?"

So this is to be a secret conversation that I'm not allowed to witness? As great a shame as it was, I had to accept it. "All right. I'll go and reapply my makeup. It's quite humid, so I've been sweating."

Lord Simeon nodded.

In his usual lighthearted tone, Ambassador Nigel said, “I hope I’ll have a chance to talk to you properly later. It’s been a while, so perhaps you’d even permit me a dance?”

Murderous intent flashed in Lord Simeon’s eyes. The ambassador only smiled at this, thoroughly enjoying it. Even though there was only one year between them in age, the ease with which he teased and bantered made Ambassador Nigel seem far more grown up.

I left them and made my way out of the room.

He really doesn’t need to take every single word as an affront. For Ambassador Nigel, it has no more significance than saying hello. He sees me less as a woman and more as a child. After all, no one would describe me as a “cute little wife” if they were seriously trying to woo me.

That aside, I was highly intrigued to know about the information being hinted at. *The “eastern beauty” must surely refer to the Republic of Orta. We encountered one of their plots only recently, so I hope they’re not planning to strike again so soon. That would be quite unpleasant.*

As a country, Orta always seemed to be a powder keg waiting to go off, but a real war *probably* wasn’t in the cards. Right now, they weren’t really in a position for that. Their domestic affairs were a mess, and they were already experiencing friction with all their neighboring countries. In those circumstances, it would have been foolish to openly court conflict with a great power like Lagrange. However, they did appear to be intently focused on sending out covert operatives, so anything could have been happening behind the scenes.

On that note, I suddenly recalled the man with silvery gray hair who had disappeared beneath the waves so quickly. Though he’d lived in Lagrangian territory for years, presenting a pleasant face to the world, in fact he was an Ortan operative working undercover. What had happened to him? Had he really died, or had he managed to escape?

The comment from Ambassador Nigel about a grudge being intensified was probably just him adding a little flair in his own characteristic manner. Still, the idea of that particular operative having survived is quite terrifying.

No, stop, stop! Right now, the problem we're facing is about Julianne and His Highness. There's no use quaking in fear over hypotheticals.

Shaking off my gloom, I went out into the corridor. Dotted all around were others who had escaped to feel the cool breeze through the windows, just like me. On my way to the powder room, I caught snippets of conversation about the Sorels.

"They're acting all high and mighty right now, but what do they plan to do if it's all a big mistake?"

"Nothing's been announced by the palace yet, has it? I still find it very hard to believe."

"Even if it *is* true, the way they're acting seems very unwise. How could anyone see that and think they have enough class for their house to be joined with the royal family? It's madness."

As I had expected, people were speaking ill of them behind their back. *No surprise there*, I thought to myself.

Just then, I heard some men speaking nearby.

"After all this time without choosing a bride, *this* is who he settles on? It's so far outside of all reasonable expectations that it's difficult to even predict how it will turn out. Does this bode well or ill for the country? Who can say?"

"She's from an insignificant barony that doesn't belong to either faction, as I understand it. However, they do have a close relationship with House Flaubert, which might speak to their allegiance. The girl who married House Flaubert's heir is a close relative of theirs, isn't she?"

"Yes, and that connection is probably what gave her the opportunity to meet His Highness at all."

The ones speaking these words had not noticed that I was right in front of them. While watching with surreptitious glances, I stood close to a nearby window and pretended I was resting there. There was no need to hide too stealthily; they wouldn't remember my face, and there was nothing remarkable about a young lady going into the corridor for some fresh air. I was part of the scenery—nothing worth paying attention to.

This was my greatest skill: collecting rumors and gossip as people exchanged them in society. The fact that I was plain and didn't make a strong impression could, depending on how I used it, be a powerful weapon. Using a technique worthy of an assassin—the ancient and hallowed art of blending into the background—I suppressed my presence and listened in on the conversation.

“So the prince has chosen his bride from a house with ties to Flaubert. Ultimately, does this mean it was all set up by Flaubert?”

“Perhaps. Alternatively, the royal family might have suggested it from their side. In the monarchist faction, House Flaubert is top of the list. It's only natural that they'd want to further strengthen their ties.”

“Hmm...”

I knew the names and faces of those talking, of course. The one speaking with particular confidence in his own opinions was rather well known. He was Marquess Lucien Rafale, an influential figure in parliament.

“I wonder what it will mean for us. Flaubert and the royal family growing even closer isn't exactly ideal.”

“Frankly, I doubt it'll make a difference. House Flaubert is already the royal family's lapdog, so it would have been better to marry a girl from an unrelated house. There's no need to win Flaubert's favor any further at this stage, and there can be very little benefit to be had from marrying someone nobody has ever heard of. Why he would make such a choice is still a mystery to me.”

As I listened, pretending to cool off, I heard a low and disquieting sound from the night air outside. What briefly felt like a light spray gave way to heavier rain. The wind was making the trees sway in the garden and a damp scent blanketed the night. No sooner did I notice that than I heard restless scurrying; the streaks of rain became more forceful and the people who had gone outside rushed back in a panic. Servants ran around to close all the windows. The sounds of rainfall and footsteps were too loud and obscured the voices I'd been listening to. When the window in front of me was closed, I turned and saw that Marquess Rafale was walking back toward the ballroom with his companions.

His lustrous hair was a deep reddish brown and his beard was carefully shaved into a goatee. I was sure that anyone who looked at him would deem

him an attractive man, but he was too dangerous a figure to innocently admire and pine for.

Being a man in his mid-thirties, he was still young, but he spoke in parliament with a powerful and persuasive manner that had won him many supporters. He was known for standing at the forefront of the reformist faction. Seeing him up close, he did seem rather impressive. I could sense the charisma that had won so many hearts and minds.

Not noticing me at any point, the marquess left the corridor behind. I continued on my way and entered the powder room. It was exhausting to realize that we had fearsome foes to contend with from our own nation, let alone the Republic of Orta.

Lagrange had a long and storied history as a kingdom, but that didn't make it immune to the changing times. Political power no longer rested in the hands of the king alone, and the reformist faction, to which Marquess Rafale belonged, even wished for the monarchy to be abolished altogether. Such movements existed in Easdale and other countries as well, and were gradually spreading throughout all the northern lands.

The Lagrangian military had a great number of monarchists in its upper ranks, and His Majesty was an admirable king who governed well, so there was probably no need to worry about a coup d'état like in Orta. There didn't seem to be any widespread dissatisfaction among the populace, either; the common folk and the wealthy alike were concerned less with politics and more with commerce. Overall, the situation was calm in Lagrange. However, this didn't keep parliament from giving His Majesty plenty of trouble. In fact, they flared up at any opportunity.

Based on the way they were talking just now, the chances of them opposing Julianne's marriage into the royal family seem low. In fact, for the reformists, it might even be one of the better options, as it will make so little difference. However, does this conversely mean that the royal family won't want to welcome her with open arms? Wouldn't the king and queen want a connection that's more advantageous?

I really wonder if His Highness will be able to persuade them. Maybe her

parents' behavior is less of a problem than the complete lack of any strategic benefit to the match.

After I finished reapplying my makeup, I checked in the mirror that my dress was still in order, then left the room.

I wonder if Lord Simeon and Ambassador Nigel have finished with their conversation yet. I'd better go back for now, anyway. One way or another, I'll have to see Baron and Baroness Sorel. Yes, I should focus on the matter in front of me. If I start worrying about everything all at once, there'll be no end to it.

I started walking back, guided by the bustling sounds of music and chatter from the ballroom. As I struggled against the awkwardness of my dress, I was suddenly halted when someone approached and said, "Mrs. Flaubert?"

For a moment it didn't register that this referred to me. *Oh, that's right! My name isn't Marielle Clarac anymore.* I hurriedly turned and said, "Yes?"

Standing before me was a lady of about my mother's age. She appeared to be a servant, but at the same time, she had a very different aura than that of ordinary maids taking care of menial work. Though the outfit, a black dress covered by an apron, was the same as that of any maid, she wore them with a sense of polish and class.

Now that I was facing her, she gave a curtsy and pointed in a different direction than the ballroom. "Would you mind coming with me? Your husband entrusted me with a message. I'm told there's a slightly delicate matter he'd like to discuss with you. He's waiting."

"Oh, I see."

She also wasn't pointing toward any sort of antechamber that was open to guests. Rather, the way led deeper inside the building. *Has Lord Simeon commandeered a secret room in order to discuss secret business? Could the information from Ambassador Nigel really have been that urgent?* I was rather dubious, however. *If it was Lord Simeon, he could just tell me when we get home.*

"Thank you for letting me know. Incidentally, did my husband seem well? He's drunk rather a lot this evening, so I'd expect him to be tired and emotional."

She cocked her head slightly at my question, then issued a calm and clear denial. “No, he showed no signs of that. He didn’t slur his words at all, nor did his appearance mark him out as inebriated.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you.”

Hmm, interesting! If she wasn’t drawn in by that ruse, maybe it really is a message from Lord Simeon. It might not have anything to do with the ambassador, though. Perhaps it’s about the Sorels. Well, I might as well go with her. There are plenty of people nearby, so nothing too odd can happen, I’m sure.

She led me through the building. Along the way, the corridors were lined with male servants who stood out far more than they probably meant to. On closer inspection, it was clear they were military officers *pretending* to be servants. Their bodies were trained underneath those uniforms, and when I nodded at a face I recognized, I received an awkward smile in return.

If the royal guards are here, does that mean there’s been another surprise appearance from His Highness? If so, Lord Simeon probably is waiting past here. My remaining wariness disappeared.

When we reached our destination, the woman opened the door and said, “I’ve brought her.” She then turned to thank me and stood aside.

I stepped through the door and into the room. The moment I did, the soft scent of jasmine tickled at my nose. A low, languid voice greeted me.

“Oho. You are beguilingly beautiful this evening, especially considering a mere month ago you looked no more than a child.”

Long, black hair flowed over the shoulders of his tasteful jacket, and his gray eyes smiled cheerfully as he taunted me.

“You are still wearing those glasses, I see. Did you also bring your notebook?”

He reminded me of the moon wavering on the water’s surface. When he looked at me, that alone was enough to make me feel anxious. I stood stock still, the breath caught in my throat.

It’s him. It’s him! Why does it have to be HIM!?

Chapter Six

Nerves shot through my whole body and a cold sweat broke out. My makeup was liable to be ruined again after all the effort I'd just been to.

The man inside the room was neither Lord Simeon nor Prince Severin. Instead, lying in wait for me was the king's cousin and one of the three great dukes of the Kingdom of Lagrange, Duke Silvestre.

"Aren't you going to say hello?" he asked with a laugh, clearly amused at how petrified I was.

He made no effort to stand. Instead, he looked up at me while reclining in a chair. His handsome features, resembling those of the king, looked far kinder than they had before, but I could do nothing to shake the feeling that I didn't want to be here. It wasn't that I hated him, but I would have been happy never coming face to face with him ever again.

It wasn't that he was a bad person. There were times when he could be remarkably generous. However, he could just as often be unspeakably cruel. Depending on his whims, he could be a sinner or a saint. It was hard to tell what he was thinking and planning, which made him very troublesome to deal with, and his status, which put him second only to the royal family, exacerbated this. Having been the victim of his schemes on more than one occasion, I would have preferred to keep him at a distance.

I slowly bent my knees and delivered a polite curtsy. "Please excuse me. It's a pleasure to see you again, Your Grace. I'm afraid I was somewhat startled, as I was told that my husband had summoned me."

When I offered this greeting, which held a touch of irony, he replied only with a sigh and a laugh.

I continued, "I can only imagine what prompted you to summon me under that pretense. Would it not have been possible for my husband to join us?"

Standing up straight again, I speedily cast my eyes around the room. Though

there were a few chairs, it was fairly cramped and didn't have the appearance of a room you'd stay in for very long. Since there was a door on the other side, it was probably an antechamber. This meant that most likely, the one the knights were here to guard was beyond that door.

"If he were here, he'd be too quick to answer for you. We're seeking a candid heart-to-heart, so it's better to leave the guard dog in his kennel."

Good mood or bad, the duke always acted in a calm and unruffled manner. He answered my question in his usual dry tone. Considering he was in the same age bracket as Marquess Rafale, the impression one got of him was drastically different. There was never the slightest hint of vigor or passion; instead, there was a bottomless pit of eerie foreboding.

"And what is it you'd like to discuss with me?" I asked.

"Knowing you, I'm sure you can guess without me going into all the details. Now, follow me."

The duke stood from his chair and walked toward the far door. *So, the main star really is beyond that door. If Duke Silvestre is the opening act, there aren't many people it could be. Which one is in attendance?*

Whoever it was, I dearly wished I was anywhere but here.

"What are you doing? This way."

"Yes, I'm coming."

Now that he'd ushered me along a second time, I had no choice but to join him. The woman who had led me there went in front, once again opening the door and then standing to the side. Duke Silvestre entered the room, and I managed to convince my feet to follow despite how reluctant they were.

A woman's voice, slightly on the deeper side, reached my ears. "Well done, Duke Silvestre, and welcome, Lady Flaubert."

Ah, so it was her. My instincts made me look down, but I raised my head and saw her sitting comfortably on a couch.

We appeared to be in a sort of combined parlor and library. It was a cozy room without too much in the way of excessive splendor, and the many

bookcases displayed the spines of an impressive array of books. The seats surrounded a small table; I could imagine coming here to sit and read or enjoy a light chat.

Waiting for me there was a lady of surprisingly plain appearance considering her lofty title. It's not that she wasn't pretty. Although I was plain as well, her plainness was of a different variety altogether. Her face was dignified and well-featured, but her looks didn't assert themselves ostentatiously. Her dark brown hair, close to black, was currently tied up in a modest style, perhaps because she arrived in secret. Her dress, too, was low-key. She almost looked like an ordinary middle-aged lady one might see anywhere in society. However, the solemnity that cloaked her did not permit the use of the word "ordinary."

It was the second time I'd seen her at close range. The first had been during winter, when she'd held an indoor "garden party" to introduce His Highness to potential matches. I was not invited as one of the candidates, but to stand on the sidelines and watch, disguised as some sort of attendant. She probably hadn't even been aware of my presence.

Now, though, there was no one else here. I'd been invited to the room alone, and Duke Silvestre had been the one to arrange it. There were only two possible people in the country who could have enlisted his help: His Majesty the King and Her Majesty the Queen. I knew it had to be one or the other, and it turned out to have been the latter.

I quietly drew a breath, then kneeled where I stood.

"I am unspeakably honored to find myself in your presence, Your Majesty. I am Marielle, wife of Simeon Flaubert. Words cannot express my delight at finding you in such good humor."

"Thank you for your politeness. Please feel free to relax. This is not the palace, and I have come here unofficially. I'd appreciate it if we could cut the exaggerated pleasantries short and speak candidly."

After a pause I replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

At her urging, I stood back up, but I couldn't let myself be at ease. Showing such respect was mandatory when speaking to the queen. Despite the existence of parliament and the reformist faction, the king and queen were still the most

powerful figures in the country, standing head and shoulders above the rest. I couldn't take the same familiar tone I did with their son, Prince Severin.

Actually, when I'd first met the crown prince, I had tried to present myself as a polite and innocent figure, just as one is supposed to do. However, due to his own personality and the various events that unfolded, he soon learned who I really was. Before I knew it, we were like a brother and sister. Of course, that sort of casual banter still wasn't allowed in public. Even with His Highness, the only time I could be relaxed around him was when no one was present beyond a close circle of friends.

None of that circle was present right now. I had to remain on guard at every moment to ensure I didn't slip up and cause problems for Lord Simeon or House Flaubert as a whole.

"You needn't be so nervous, I promise you. I've heard all about you from my daughters. They've told me how cheerful and spirited you are. The duke here, too, has told me you have an audacious nature that betrays your appearance—that you're quite an eccentric, in fact. I've been longing to meet you for some time."

Ugh, I'm trying to smile but I can't keep myself from twitching! I knew the turmoil would be visible on my face. Now that I think about it, I have broken the rules of good decorum in front of the duke quite a few times, haven't I? I can hardly be blamed for that, though! He was trying to twist me around his little finger! I couldn't simply give in and accept defeat!

"You also get on rather well with my son, the crown prince. I even wondered if you might be a suitable bride for him. Unfortunately, you were already engaged, so I gave up on that prospect."

"I'm terribly sorry," I replied.

"He, too, seems to regard you only as a friend, but there's no denying that he's comfortable letting his guard down around you—that you're someone he feels able to trust. That's why I thought you might be able to help me. Would you mind staying here and talking to me for a little while?"

"As you command, Your Majesty."

I could hardly turn down a request from the queen. The duke directed me to sit across from her; I did so, and he took a seat beside me. The woman who had led me there didn't sit, instead taking up position behind the queen. *She must be one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting. No wonder she's so refined.*

Raindrops beat against the window glass. The wind grew stronger still. *I hope the weather will calm down before we go home. I don't want to have to walk through the rain in this dress. I'm sure it'll get caked in mud in the short walk from the building to the carriage. Maybe Lord Simeon could pick me up and carry me?*

Those thoughts ran through my head as I tried to avoid focusing on the situation at hand. To my right sat Duke Silvestre and opposite me sat Her Majesty the Queen. It was rather a mentally taxing situation to be facing alone.

Steadying my breaths, I listened to what the queen had to say.

"I mentioned that I want to speak candidly, and I fear that if we take too long your husband will start to worry, so I'll keep it brief. I came because there's something I want to ask you. I'm sure you've guessed, but it's about the young lady whom the crown prince wishes to take for his bride."

It was just as I'd thought. More precisely, it couldn't have been about anything else.

"Miss Julianne, daughter of Baron Sorel. When I first heard her name, I confess it said absolutely nothing to me. I couldn't recall her face or anything about her family. This didn't apply only to me. Everyone else I spoke to had the same reaction. According to my son, the head of the house doesn't serve in any governmental post or manage any sort of business. House Sorel is, in fact, a mere wisp of a house, subsisting solely on the rental income from inherited land. Based on that, it was hardly surprising that no one could remember them. To put it bluntly, they're one of countless minor houses that don't stand out at all."

I hesitated for a moment, then replied, "Indeed, Your Majesty."

"Without meaning to disparage her, a girl of her background won't have learned any of the skills and knowledge demanded of a crown princess. Starting from scratch will be rather a strenuous effort. She'll have only a brief period of

time to learn things that others have studied since they were born. This does make me worry.”

“Understandably, Your Majesty.”

Showing all the impartiality and sage wisdom that one would expect given her reputation, the queen did not simply dismiss Julianne out of hand. The point she had made was quite reasonable. Julianne was indeed entirely lacking in that regard, so of course it was a cause for concern. She was certain to have a hard time learning all that was required of her.

“Additionally, there is the problem of her parents, Baron and Baroness Sorel. Despite the fact that His Majesty and I have yet to give our consent to the match, they’re announcing it to all and sundry as though it’s a settled matter.”

I knew she’d bring that up, I thought, fighting the urge to bury my face in my hands. Yes, naturally that’s the most glaring problem. How could anyone be surprised by that? Still, hearing it is like a nightmare coming true!

“Their lack of caution has been surprising, to say the least. I ordered an investigation into their characters, and the information I received only made me more uneasy. However, I didn’t wish to judge based on hearsay alone. When taking the measure of a person, it’s important to see them with one’s own eyes. That’s why I came here in secret this evening. I spent some time in the ballroom in order to catch a glimpse of them myself. Sadly, my conclusion was that the reports were not mistaken.”

Nervously, I replied, “I see.”

It was hard to believe she’d been so quick off the mark. I hadn’t even spoken to the Sorels yet. I’d been thoroughly outpaced.

“To sum up my honest impression, they are superficial fools without a shred of class. One can easily guess at the nature of a daughter raised by such parents. My gut feeling is that I couldn’t possibly approve of such a girl, regardless of how much the crown prince likes her—but it would be far too unfeeling of me to take such a stance. If my son wants to spend his life with Miss Julianne, then she surely has positive qualities. If her virtues are enough to make her a desirable match even when weighed up against the many flaws and concerns, I absolutely must know.”

Her Majesty's eyes, a deep shade, watched intently for my response. She reminded me of my grandmother. Though her appearance and social status were completely different, there was something about her gaze that was very familiar. It wasn't an overpowering stare. Rather, she looked at me with quiet eyes that wouldn't be deceived by any lies or excuses. Just like my grandmother's keen gaze, it saw through all deceptions.

"With the preamble out of the way, let's come to the main point. The reason I've called you here is because I'd like you to tell me about Miss Julianne. You're not only her cousin, but her close friend since childhood, so I've been told. You should be perfectly placed to give me a detailed picture of what type of person she is. Would you mind sharing your thoughts with me? What is it about her that's made the crown prince so smitten?"

She finished speaking, and all that could be heard now was the sound of the rain. Rather than pressing me further, she waited patiently for me to reply of my own accord. Duke Silvestre, inscrutable as always, simply looked at us both with torpid eyes.

Conscious of my breathing, I arranged my thoughts. There was a fork in the road here, and the path chosen depended on how I answered. I couldn't put a foot wrong.

Does wanting to learn about Julianne's character mean that she's thinking of accepting her even though the marriage provides no benefit to the royal family? If the queen feels this way, the king probably does as well. If so, that means there's hope. If it came down to nothing but political power struggles I would have to throw up my hands in defeat, but if it's a matter of personal qualities, there's still a fighting chance.

After all the struggles Julianne had faced, it was impossible not to wish for her happiness. Seeing her cry in His Highness's arms had only underscored this. Since before I could even remember, she'd been my best friend and closest companion. Our understanding for one another was deeper even than my connection to Lord Simeon.

I could talk endlessly about all the wonderful qualities she has. I could list her flaws in great detail as well. Fulfilling the queen's request would be very, very

easy. What exactly does she want to hear, though?

“Understood, Your Majesty,” I began cautiously. “I’m truly grateful to hear that you haven’t simply rejected Julianne, but are willing to learn more about her before making a decision. As you’ve suggested, she indeed has virtues that make her worthy of His Highness’s affection. They say that love is blind, but naturally, a love without due consideration wouldn’t be a successful one. His Highness has learned everything about Julianne and has only discovered more reasons for wanting to marry her. I’d like it if you could do the same, Your Majesty. If at all possible, I’d ask you to get to know Julianne yourself.”

I straightened my back, steeled all my courage, and let the queen’s gaze meet my own. Duke Silvestre stared just as intimidatingly, like an animal waiting for its moment to pounce, but I didn’t let myself be daunted. With every ounce of determination I had, I told the queen exactly what I was thinking.

“As you said a moment ago, when taking the measure of a person, it’s important to see them with one’s own eyes. If you judge Julianne based purely based on information you’ve heard from a third party, it won’t necessarily be a fair and accurate judgment. There may be errors, assumptions, and oversights. It’s also possible that the speaker might make a conscious effort to deceive you. Surely you shouldn’t decide based on information you can’t be certain is correct? If there’s any way you would consider it, I beg you to see Julianne for yourself and learn the truth.”

“Does that mean you don’t intend to tell me anything?”

“It does,” I replied with a nod.

She let out a small chuckle. “This is your opportunity to sing your friend’s praises, and yet you won’t say a word? Either you have a great deal of confidence or you don’t actually wish for her success.”

“Only she can be responsible for her success or failure. The most I can do is watch from afar and lend a hand where necessary.”

“You don’t feel that telling me about her now would be lending a hand?”

By this point, my nerves had finally abated somewhat. I tilted my head slightly and mustered a tiny smile. “Let’s suppose that I paint a flawless picture of

Julianne, and based on that you approve the marriage. At some point, Julianne will then present herself before you and His Majesty, so either way you'll see her in person eventually. When that happens, there's a chance that you'll feel you've been misled, as what you see will be different than what I told you. Different people see different things even when looking at the same person. Traits that one person might value, another might see as completely worthless. However much praise I lavish on Julianne here, it's meaningless if you turn out to disagree with me. I fear I'd then be the subject of your ire, as you'd believe I'd given you a false estimation."

"It's also possible to have one's opinion swayed by being given hints in advance. If I've been told of her good nature, I might be more forgiving of certain other details. My eye could be drawn to qualities that I wouldn't have noticed on my own."

"I'll admit that this might apply when discussing a play or the latest fashion, but when judging people, I'm far more skeptical. Being swayed by others' opinions isn't advisable, but I'm not convinced that you'd let yourself be swayed, Your Majesty. This is a matter that has an impact not only on your son's life, but the very future of the kingdom. It's something you must decide on with great caution and a strict lack of bias. I can't imagine you'd be influenced so easily."

"Well, I never," she replied, chuckling again.

Duke Silvestre, who was silently watching, uncrossed his legs and then crossed them the other way. Though underneath I was cowering in fear at even this slight movement, I forced my face to remain calm. I wasn't as full of confidence as my attitude suggested, but everything I'd said was what I truly believed. Honesty was the best policy when confronted by someone who would see through any attempts at cheap trickery.

"My proposal would be that you first look at Julianne directly, and then, if you wish it, I'll add some further comments. In my opinion, that would be a far preferable approach."

When I finished, silence fell for a short time. Her Majesty considered what I'd said with a placid expression. I didn't sense any displeasure at my response, but

at the same time, I wouldn't have said she was entirely happy with it. Secretly filled with trepidation over what she might be thinking, I waited for her to share her thoughts.

Finally, she let out a soft breath. "Have you started taking after your husband, or were you cut from the same cloth to begin with? It feels just like talking to him. He's also serious to a fault and far too stubborn."

It took me aback slightly to hear her make this comment in such an amused tone. *Lord Simeon and I, cut from the same cloth? Surely not. Except, looking back, I have been called "stubborn" myself once in a while, haven't I? Even by the king of obstinacy himself. The precise things we're stubborn about may be different, but the way I stand firmly behind my own convictions does resemble him after all, I suppose.*

"What a shame," she continued. "If only I could have been welcoming *you* as crown princess."

"I don't think His Highness would be very pleased with that. Incidentally, there's one other point I'd like to mention."

"Go ahead."

"Julianne would definitely complain about me talking about her behind her back. If I did advocate for her without her permission, she'd get annoyed with me."

Her Majesty's eyes widened for a moment, then she exclaimed, "Goodness!"

She laughed musically, and Duke Silvestre joined her, emitting a puff of breath akin to a laugh. *That's not a negative response, I don't think. It doesn't seem like they're mocking me, just that they're amused.*

With a smile in her eyes, the queen's face looked softer than it had before. She had a little more of an affable, easygoing air about her. "Is that so? Very well, then. If you're willing to go so far, then—"

All of a sudden, she was interrupted by some rough, violent noises outside the door. When I turned my head in surprise, a frantic knock followed.

I grew uneasy, wondering who it could be, but the queen and duke remained

composed. They exchanged a glance with one another.

“He got here rather quickly,” said the queen.

“That’s hardly a surprise,” the duke responded.

Both of them seem to know who’s arrived. That hopefully means it’s not someone untoward coming to do who knows what. Perhaps I should try to calm down.

However, the persistent knocking, repeated again and again, conveyed clear annoyance on the part of the new visitor, which did scare me slightly.

“I suppose I’d better let him in, hadn’t I? Very well. Enter!”

The instant the queen gave her permission, the door was flung open with quite some force.

The tension left my shoulders. *Oh, I see. It’s just Lord Simeon. There I was thinking it might be someone suspicious!*

My relief lasted only for a moment, however. The ferocious expression on his face left me quite shocked, as did the state of the person he’d brought with him. One of the royal guards pretending to be a servant was in a tight headlock, looking as though Lord Simeon had forcibly dragged him here.

Lord Simeon, what exactly are you doing!?

His eyes swept across the room. As soon as he found me, he calmed down very slightly. That one look was enough for me to comprehend.

Yes, I see. He was worried about me. I never came back, so he went looking.

“Don’t you think that’s a rather cruel way to treat your subordinate?” asked the queen. “He doesn’t appear to be in any pain, thank goodness, but kindly let him go.”

“This is no more than a military officer is used to facing on a daily basis,” Lord Simeon replied, making no effort to hide his ill temper. “You needn’t worry.”

The look on the restrained knight’s face said he *firmly* disagreed with this, but my husband ignored it, likely on purpose.

Instead he continued, “I wasn’t made aware of any plans to deploy the men

here. Did the Captain give his approval? Based on my own observations, the number of guards appears to be wildly insufficient.”

“There are more standing by outside. Naturally, this did indeed go through Brigadier Poisson. It involved mobilizing the knights, so that goes without saying.”

“Might I ask what need you have of my wife? I’d have appreciated you informing me about this, at least, rather than staging what appeared to be a kidnapping.”

“A kidnapping? What a scandalous thing to say. I’m sure you realize why I couldn’t make anyone aware of my presence here. It was imperative to have her visit me in secret.”

“Surely there was no need to keep it a secret from me as well.”

In a frank tone, Duke Silvestre interjected, “If you were here, it would have been more difficult to talk. You’d smother her with your overprotectiveness and bare your threatening fangs to prevent us from getting close. To be blunt, you’d have gotten in the way.” Even with the blue fire of my husband’s eyes turned on him, the duke was as nonchalant as ever. With a snort, he added, “More pressingly, can’t you let that poor man go? His face is turning a very odd color.”

The man in question, who was pounding his fist against Lord Simeon’s arm, pleading for release, gradually began to lose his vigor. Just as the duke had said, his face was starting to appear dim and murky. *How much force must Lord Simeon be using if a trained knight can’t escape? He looks like a prince on the outside, but he’s definitely a gorilla underneath!*

I decided to speak up. “Lord Simeon, could you please let him go? Why are you treating him so harshly?”

“He tried to pull the wool over my eyes and refused to answer direct questions from his superior officer. Did he truly believe I wouldn’t see through such a shoddy disguise?”

“I’m sure he wanted to answer, but he couldn’t due to his orders. Besides, it hardly matters how good his disguise was. Your aide is never going to convince you he’s someone else.”

The one Lord Simeon was slowly choking to death was none other than his own aide, Alain Lisnard. There was absolutely no hope of a man he worked with every single day keeping up such a pretense, and I'm sure Alain understood that. However, if he'd been given an order by Her Majesty, he'd have had no choice but to obey. Caught between his boss and the queen, he'd been put in a very unfortunate position.

Why do I get the feeling there was some intentional japery at play here? Assigning Alain of all people must have been a practical joke on the part of either Duke Silvestre or the Captain.

"Lieutenant Colonel Flaubert, let Lieutenant Lisnard go."

The queen gave this order a second time, and Lord Simeon finally released him. Alain collapsed to the floor and appeared to lack the energy to stand up again. He stayed there, gasping for breath.

Discarding him coldly, Lord Simeon strode over to the table and stood by my side. Unable to contain his anger, he spat, "Your Majesty, could I ask you to tell me what my wife is doing here? Depending on the circumstances, my objections may be strong enough that I'm forced to submit my resignation."

He looked down at the queen with a brazenly imposing glare that could easily be described as disrespectful. Witnessing this made a cold sweat run over me. No matter how worried he had been, this attitude was a step too far when speaking to Her Majesty. It was unbelievable given that *he* was the one always rebuking *me* for my impropriety.

While eyeing the queen and duke to take in their reactions, I surreptitiously pulled at the end of Lord Simeon's sleeve. I thought he might shake his arm to brush me off, but instead his hand took hold of mine. *No, that's not why I was doing that!* I tried to pull my hand away, but his strength didn't allow for it. The warmth of his touch made me happy, but I was embarrassed about how he was acting, and scared of a reprisal. I was left in disarray.

The queen looked back with a mixture of puzzlement and exasperation. Turning to the duke, she asked, "What on earth has made the lieutenant colonel so angry? It's as though he's an entirely different person than I'm used to."

The duke rested an elbow on the arm of his chair and smiled listlessly. “He often presents the demeanor of a well-behaved guard dog, but he’s only hiding his savage temperament. If you do anything to the rabbit he holds so dear, he bares his fangs at once. My guess is that he thinks a certain matter that arose before is still under discussion.”



“What matter?” I asked, mostly to myself. However, it only took a moment to realize. *Ah, I see now. That’s why he’s so upset.*

After learning about my friendship with His Highness, the queen had wished I could marry him. Actually, since my own wedding was just around the corner, she had idly grumbled about the fact that I wasn’t an available candidate. On hearing this, the duke had set an elaborate plan into motion that was designed to split us up. This had made the final days before our wedding into a terrible ordeal.

If Lord Simeon thinks those efforts are still ongoing, I can definitely see why he’d be enraged.

I hurried to reassure him otherwise. “No, Lord Simeon, you’ve misunderstood. It’s not about me, it’s about Julianne! Her Majesty asked me here so I could tell her about Julianne’s character. That’s all, I swear!”

Lord Simeon’s eyes turned toward me. Behind his glasses, the blazing flames flickered doubtfully.

“I believe we were also nearly finished when you arrived,” I added. “There’s absolutely nothing for you to worry about. Well, I did make you worry by disappearing without a word, so I apologize for that.”

Her Majesty said, “I’ll note that your wife bears no fault for that whatsoever. I made her come here, so please allow me to express my apologies as well. In any case, I’d say you arrived just in time, as I have something to discuss with you as well. Sit.”

Never flinching even once despite facing the brunt of Lord Simeon’s rage, the queen gave this order with the same gravitas she’d maintained all along.

After a single breath, Lord Simeon released my hand, then put his own hand on his chest. “I’ve been unpardonably rude. I apologize most profusely for my disrespect.”

At last, it seemed, he had realized it was a misunderstanding. The wrath that had enveloped his whole body vanished into the ether. Now that he had returned to being a devoted subject, he lowered his head.

The queen nodded magnanimously. “You’re forgiven. I’m to blame as well for acting in a way that caught you off guard.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. It always made me nervous when Lord Simeon behaved in such an intense manner, but with the target being who she was in this case, I truly had been scared. *No matter how angry he was, Her Majesty the Queen requires a certain level of decorum.*

At her urging, Lord Simeon sat down beside me. Behind us, Alain finally managed to stand up again. His voice wavering, he said, “It would be better for me to wait outside, don’t you agree? I’ll return to my post.”

He seemed eager to make his escape, but Lord Simeon heartlessly rejected his proposal without even turning his head. “There should be at least one guard inside the room. Remain here.”

Alain shriveled up in fear to a degree that made me feel sorry for him. “D-d-don’t you think it’s enough for you to be here, Vice Captain? There’s no one present who could lay their hands on the queen anyway. Surely the likes of me shouldn’t bear witness to private matters discussed by Her Majesty and His Grace. I should definitely leave.”

This time Lord Simeon did turn his head. “Lieutenant.”

Faced with the piercing glint of those glasses, this time Alain turned white as a sheet. He let out a high-pitched whimper.

The queen came to his rescue once again. “Lieutenant Colonel, stop bullying your subordinate. Lieutenant, I permit you to withdraw. You may go at once.”

“Yes, thank you, Your Majesty! Please excuse me!”

He issued a sharp salute, then sped out of the room at an impressive speed. Lord Simeon saw him off with little more than a sniff. *I suspect he means to subject Alain to further torment later. I’ll try to put Lord Simeon into a better mood so Alain doesn’t have to suffer too badly.*

The queen laughed. “I’ve seen many unexpected sides of you today, Lieutenant Colonel.”

To me, it felt unusual for Lord Simeon to be called by his rank rather than his

title of Vice Captain. Much like chiefs of staff and naval leaders, he was far more often referred to by his title. There were a number of reasons why so many people called him “Vice Captain.” Some wished to express their respect for his prestigious role in the Royal Order of Knights, while others found his actual rank distasteful, as it was far higher than was typical for his age. Some simply followed the crowd, taking the same approach as everyone else.

In Her Majesty’s case, my impression was that she wished to avoid giving him any special treatment. Even though he had been her son’s closest friend from a young age, she still maintained a certain distance and approached him impartially. I keenly felt why she was so esteemed for her sage wisdom.

Once Alain had left, she left a brief pause, then picked up the conversation again. “As your wife mentioned, I wish to know more about Miss Julianne Sorel. However, your wife responded that she would not tell me anything herself, but would prefer me to observe the young lady directly. It’s true that this is a better approach when judging someone’s character. Taking this feedback on board, I’ve decided to invite Miss Julianne to the palace. I’ll have her work in close proximity to me for a time under the pretext of etiquette training.”

She declared this not as a suggestion that required our input, but as a firmly decided matter. Rather than invite Julianne to the palace for an audience or as a guest, she planned to make her work there. It was common enough for a young lady to go to work before her wedding in order to learn proper etiquette and deportment, so this wouldn’t seem unnatural. In any case, it was clear that no objections would be heard, so there would be no point in raising any.

This does mean a decision has been made without Julianne’s knowledge. I suppose she’ll have no choice but to obey an order from the queen.

Lord Simeon fully understood this as well and expressed no dissent. Already, I began to turn my attention to subsequent matters, such as the need to inform Julianne as soon as I got home.

However, as if purposely launching an attack the moment I let my guard down, the queen added a highly unexpected corollary.

“I imagine Miss Julianne will be rather apprehensive at having all this settled without her, then being thrown into a new and unfamiliar environment all on

her own. It would be awful if she had no one to talk to. Marielle, you'll come to the palace as well."

I blinked. "What?"

For a moment my mind failed to comprehend this, so that witless response was all I could manage. A smile appeared on the queen's face that was kind, but held a hint of teasing as well. Under different circumstances, I might have started fangirling over her, thinking, *Is she secretly blackhearted as well?* Alas, I was too preoccupied for that.

"Your presence will only be required during Miss Julianne's stay at the palace. You'll serve there as well in order to lend her a hand. Hmm, yes. You'll become my lady-in-waiting."

"What? But..."

Lady-in-waiting? To the queen? Me!? I understood what the words meant, but I couldn't make them fit together.

As I faltered, unable to respond properly, Lord Simeon interjected, "Please, hold on a moment. My wife has no experience of such work and lacks all the necessary knowledge. I can't imagine she'll be much help as your personal attendant."

Yes, exactly! That's just what I wanted to say! There is absolutely no way I'm fit to be the queen's lady-in-waiting!

"That doesn't matter. Your role as my lady-in-waiting will only be for show. I told you, your real task is to give Miss Julianne someone to talk to. The rest is merely an excuse."

"But—" Lord Simeon began.

"Is there some problem?" she asked firmly.

He closed his mouth, but he glanced at me with a look that spoke of great unease. His thoughts were clear as day. *You expect HER to go to the palace and serve beside the queen?*

Part of me felt a little offended, but I completely understood the reason for his apprehension, so I could hardly complain. *So sorry that your wife is such a*

problem child!

Hesitantly, I spoke up. “Well, honestly, I don’t mind serving at the palace. In that respect, it’s no problem at all. However, I come from a family of equivalent status to House Sorel. Although I have married into House Flaubert, I still have a huge amount left to learn. I’m definitely not qualified to work as your lady-in-waiting, Your Majesty. Perhaps I could fulfill a slightly less prominent role? I could work as cleaning staff, or take care of laundry, for example?”

“Those are not ‘slightly’ less prominent roles, my dear, they are *far* less prominent. Just to be certain, have you ever done any cleaning or laundry before?”

“Oh, well... I’ve tidied up my bedroom, if that counts...”

Despite my best efforts, my voice tailed off into nothing. The embarrassing truth was that my maid, Natalie, had taken care of almost everything for me.

When I confessed this, Her Majesty replied, “That’s more or less the job of a lady-in-waiting. It involves taking personal care of the mistress’s daily necessities. You must now have a lady’s maid provided by House Flaubert, I assume? It’s rather similar.”

“Yes,” I replied, my voice a murmur.

“You needn’t be so ill at ease. If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a thousand times: it’s no more than a pretext. Don’t overthink it. You will come to the palace in order to accompany Miss Julianne.”

After being given a direct order, albeit in a gentle manner, there was nothing I could do but agree. “Understood,” I said at last.

In truth, it was indeed a worrying prospect to send Julianne off on her own. After my part in setting this in motion, I couldn’t turn a blind eye.

If this is how it must be, then I’m ready! I’ll gladly accept my fate! If the goal is to watch over Julianne and give her someone to talk to, then it doesn’t matter that I’ll be utterly useless as a lady-in-waiting. It’s an excuse, that’s all. Her Majesty has made that clear.

Next to me, Lord Simeon still wore an expression that was heavy with

meaning. I gave him a look that said it was going to be all right—that I'd maintain proper decorum despite my true nature and somehow get through this. *It's fine. I'm not going to let my fangirl flag fly while working at the palace.*

Duke Silvestre watched our nonverbal exchange with a look of amusement. Outside the window, the rain continued to fall. I told myself that the momentary flashes of light were not an ominous portent at all, but a symbol of my newfound determination. The low rumbling sounds were there to spur me on. Whether or not I convinced myself of this was another matter.

Chapter Seven

A bell rang in the distance. The rhythmic sound pulled my consciousness out of its slumber. As I lay there comfortably, half awake, I soon noticed that beside me in the bed, where a person should have been, was an empty space. The sensation of the sheets against my skin was also different, as were the height and firmness of the pillow. Without even opening my eyes, I knew that this was not my own bed in my own home.

Now I remember. Yesterday I came to the palace. I'm in the staff living quarters, where I'll be staying for the time being.

I opened my sleepy eyes and stretched out my limbs in a big yawn. The absence of Lord Simeon gave me more space to do so, but this didn't give me a pleasant feeling of freedom. Rather, I felt empty, as though something deeply important was missing.

The best thing to see first thing in the morning is definitely my husband's handsome face. I'd fallen asleep without a goodnight kiss, and now, the morning after, I was still alone. This was by no means a surprise, but it was more lonely and dispiriting than I had expected.

The queen had made arrangements extremely quickly, with an official notice being sent the day after our secret meeting. Though Baron and Baroness Sorel made a huge fuss once again, I explained the situation to Julianne and she agreed. She was surprised, but she was ready to obey without a word of complaint. Although she delayed giving a clear answer to His Highness's proposal, she had no doubt been thinking about it a great deal.

We set about making our preparations to go to the palace together. After that, a few hectic days passed, then at last we had arrived.

The sound of the bell had died out now. I took a deep breath and sat up, then I took my glasses from the nightstand. Regardless of all else, I couldn't start the day without putting those on. When my vision became clearer, life flowed back into my sleep-addled head.

It's no use pining over my husband from the very first day. We only have to live apart temporarily, so I have to push through and cope with it. I can't be a spoiled child.

I got out of bed and went over to the window and flung it open. The cool morning air felt refreshing on my face.

The bedroom was positioned rather well; it caught the sunlight in the morning even though it was north-facing. The newly risen sun shone onto the palace's white walls. Just outside the window, the northern gardens spread out before me. Flower beds, lanes, fountains, and more were arranged into a carefully planned display that amplified their beauty, and dotted about among them were small reception halls and detached buildings. In the west stood the training grounds of the Royal Order of Knights, and at the eastern edge, close to the battery, was an old building with a bell tower.

The bell I'd just heard was likely from there. The chapel, built around two hundred years ago, had now fallen out of use. It had been built upon an extremely tall base, perhaps as a display of authority or to be closer to God. This meant the entrance was at about the same height as the third-floor window I was currently looking out of, with a long staircase leading up to it. In the previous generation, this was deemed too inconvenient, so a new chapel was built as part of the main palace. Only the bell tower was still in use, proudly announcing the time.

I'd woken up far earlier than usual, but I could already hear the hustle and bustle of many people moving about. Just as I began to think about getting dressed, a knock came at the door, and my lady's maid, brought from home, looked in.

"Oh, are you up already? Good morning, my lady."

"Good morning."

Joanna came straight in and began to prepare my wash basin just as briskly as always. She had brought everything I needed, including fresh clothes and my breakfast.

The position of lady-in-waiting to the queen—to which I had been assigned—held a special status compared to other palace staff. Each of the ladies in the

role was a noblewoman, and they all had their own private rooms, which were spacious and well-furnished. I could expect to be treated quite differently than an ordinary servant.

Julianne, however, had to share a larger room. Being unmarried, she could not be the queen's lady-in-waiting, but was instead being treated as a housemaid. Also, for reasons unknown, when I went to greet the queen after my arrival, I was made to go alone. Julianne was spirited away to a different place and hadn't been seen at all. Considering that the entire point was for her to come to the palace so the queen could get to know her personally, this had taken the wind out of my sails somewhat.

Still, I couldn't start demanding answers of the queen, and I'd been busy yesterday with introducing myself to my fellow ladies-in-waiting and receiving instructions from them. As a result, I'd been left without a clear idea of what was going to happen with Julianne. I'd had Joanna find out where her room was, and I'd tried going there at night to check on her, but she was busy talking about various things with the other housemaids, so I withdrew after confirming that she didn't look upset.

I really wonder what's going to happen today. Hopefully the queen will grant Julianne an audience. Maybe she was just allowing her some time to settle in to avoid overwhelming her. Yes, that must be it. She's only just arrived, so the real challenge starts now.

Before I left, Joanna offered some words of encouragement. "Your work starts in earnest today, doesn't it? I'm sure you'll do a fine job."

As grateful as I was, Julianne was the one who really had her work cut out for her. My task was simply to watch and provide whatever help she needed.

Outside, the housemaids were already beginning with their work. To avoid getting in the way of their cleaning tasks, I suppressed my presence, quietly passing by like a shadow. I headed to the queen's chambers with renewed vigor and determination, eager to do what I could.

However, I quickly found myself at a loose end.

"Your Majesty, might I ask a question?"

“By all means.”

Hesitantly, I asked, “What exactly would you like me to do?”

Things had not proceeded exactly as hoped. Once again, Julianne had not been summoned for an audience. I merely sat there feeling out of place.

“I wouldn’t say I need anything from you in particular today.”

“Oh. All right, then.”

She spoke while delicately guiding her needle in and out of the fabric. Apparently she had no engagements until the afternoon, so once her morning worship and audiences were finished, she had returned to her chambers, where she was occupying herself with embroidery.

This appeared to be no mere diversion. The fabric she was embroidering was the finest quality white silk, and she used thread in white and other pale shades. I could confidently surmise that this garment was to be worn by a bride at her wedding. Her youngest daughter’s marriage was already planned, so presumably she was taking care of the preparations just as any mother would. The pattern she was crafting was quite magnificent. She had likely been skilled at embroidery all her life.

Yvonne, the lady-in-waiting assisting the queen with her needlework, said, “You needn’t worry, Mrs. Flaubert. We’re simply passing the time as we see fit.”

Yvonne was the one who had accompanied the queen to the ball a few days prior. I’d learned that she was a baron’s wife, and held the highest-ranked position among the ladies-in-waiting.

Another of the group, Giselle, said, “We’ll be far busier when we must dress Her Majesty to go out, so you can feel free to relax until then.”

Giselle was the youngest, but still more than ten years older than me. Her oldest son was turning fourteen this year, in fact. There were also two other ladies-in-waiting attending to the queen, Noella and Babette.

The members of the group were variously reading or doing embroidery of their own. Indeed, they were relaxing in whatever manner they pleased. Occasionally someone arrived on an errand, but it was always taken care of

before I could lift a finger. As a result, I was left with nothing to do. I simply sat there aimlessly.

I suppose the ladies-in-waiting wouldn't be swamped with work. The odd jobs are taken care of by the housemaids assigned to the chambers, so their main job is to accompany the queen and engage in conversation with her. I can see how it might only get busy when it's time to change her clothes, as Giselle mentioned. If so, that means there's really nothing unusual about sitting and chatting casually like this with no particular task to work at.

Though if she's entirely free right now, I do wish she'd use the time to see Julianne.

I staunchly fought back against the urge to voice that complaint. Undoubtedly, Her Majesty had her reasons. My role was only to assist, so I had to let Julianne handle matters herself rather than objecting on her behalf. If she decided to raise the issue then I'd support her, but I couldn't start charging ahead of my own volition.

It was rather a struggle to have nothing whatsoever to do, though. Being told to do as I saw fit didn't leave me with too many options. I wouldn't have felt comfortable sitting there reading in front of the queen, and writing would have been even worse. Any suggestion that I engage in needlework would have been embarrassing; I couldn't bear the thought of displaying my crude attempts at embroidery in front of those with genuine skill.

The ladies were all very considerate of me, striking up a conversation now and then, but even talking to them was rather nerve-racking, so I found myself getting exhausted.

I heaved a soft sigh, keeping it as quiet as I could. The queen apparently noticed it regardless and stopped moving her hands.

"I suppose it's cruel to tell an energetic young person to remain idle. You seem not to have much interest in embroidery, but perhaps we can find something else for you."

Will she suggest that I go and see how Julianne is doing?

My hopes were quickly dashed, however. She nodded as if she'd had a flash

of inspiration, then said, “Why don’t you play some music for us?”

That was *entirely* counter to my expectations. *Me? Play some music!?* All I could respond with was a confused whimper.

“You’ve seen the piano in the next room, haven’t you? Please, play us a tune. You can play the piano, can’t you? Or perhaps you prefer another instrument?”

“No, the piano is fine,” I mumbled awkwardly, “but...”

It wouldn’t have been accurate to tell her I couldn’t play. More to the point, it would have been shameful. As a noblewoman, playing an instrument was a matter of course. However, I’d only ever done the bare minimum amount of practice required of me, which meant I was *far* from an expert. I definitely was not proficient enough to perform in front of the queen. *This is too discerning an audience for a novice, surely!*

“It would only sully your ears,” I finished.

“I’m not asking for a virtuoso performance. If I wanted such a thing, I would call on a professional musician.”

Well, yes.

“It’s an amusement to pass the time, nothing more. You honestly needn’t worry. Hmm, perhaps it really is too daunting for you. What if I have your husband join you for a duet?”

I once again emitted little more than a sound of bemusement. While my eyes widened, however, Giselle, Noella, and Babette grew very excited.

“Oh, how wonderful!”

“I’d *love* to see that! *Please* play with him, I beg of you!”

“I’ll go and prepare the room!”

As the three of them went through to the room with the piano, Her Majesty said to Yvonne, “He can’t have any meetings or training sessions going on at this time of day, can he? Please go and summon him.”

“As you wish.”

After speedily clearing away the embroidery, Yvonne left the queen’s

chambers. I was left alone in Her Majesty's presence, sitting there as it all began to be set in motion. A cold sweat ran over me.

This has taken an upsetting turn indeed. If I'd known this would happen, I'd rather have continued being bored!

Not long afterward, Lord Simeon arrived. Having been specially summoned from the royal guards' headquarters, he was not pleased when he heard the reason. His face was screwed up into a magnificent scowl. "I'd rather expected something more important. I'm busy with my work."

If the queen needed him, it had potentially been a significant matter indeed. He had even brought his aide, Alain, with him. However, the grand reveal was that he was being asked to perform in order to relieve boredom, so the Demon Vice Captain's anger was entirely reasonable. *It wasn't me who asked for this, though! I hope you realize that!*

While Alain and I watched with a great deal of trepidation, Her Majesty remained composed. "Can't you think of this as a part of your work? Are you telling me that you don't intend to fulfill my request?"

Impressive that she doesn't even flinch when the Demon Vice Captain is staring daggers at her. Her proud strength of will is just so wonderful! I'm fangirling a little!

"I am unable to fulfill any requests that fall outside of my professional duties."

"Guarding the royal family is your duty, is it not? I'm merely asking that while you stand on guard in the room, you additionally play some music."

"I refuse," he said curtly.

The Demon Vice Captain, stubborn at the best of times, was not the sort of person to accept such a waste of his time. Though looking somewhat stunned, the queen lightly shrugged her shoulders.

"So inflexible. I suppose there's no choice, then. I'll have to ask Marielle to perform alone."

What? What? WHAT!?

I'd hoped she had given up on that prospect. I wanted to bury my head in my

hands. Had it been something I had a *little* more confidence in I wouldn't have minded so much, but the piano was far too daunting. I hadn't practiced at all lately, and I was deathly afraid that my hands would have entirely forgotten how to move across the keys.

I looked at Lord Simeon, begging for rescue. He must have sensed my eyes on him, since he turned to look back. This was the first time I'd seen my husband's face again since leaving my home, and in that moment, our eyes met and I saw him falter.

Maybe I can actually convince him. I put all the force I could into my gaze, pleading with him. For a brief period, we wordlessly stared into each other's eyes.

Then, after a deep sigh, he reluctantly said, "One song. That's all."

Yes! Victory!

Expressions of joy came from Giselle and the others. Without a moment's delay, a violin was presented to Lord Simeon and I was ushered toward the piano.

Since this was such a rare opportunity, the queen also ordered the doors leading into the corridor to be opened wide. That way, not only our group, but every passerby could enjoy it as well. Permission was given for anyone to come and listen if they wished to. It wasn't long before a sizable number of housemaids had gathered.

Is this really necessary? My nerves were frayed already, and this is making it much worse.

With no choice but to obey, I sat in front of the piano and stretched my fingers. Lord Simeon temporarily put the violin and bow under one arm and took off his gloves.

At the sight of this, all the ladies present were unable to take their eyes off of him. The elderly ones had more restraint, but the younger ones gasped audibly and stared as if they wished to devour him.

I fully understand! Believe me, I share your feelings completely! Isn't it incredible to witness the moment when a military officer, who usually dresses

with every single part of him concealed, unveils some of his skin? Especially when it's the part covered by gloves. There's something special about seeing him put the gloves on, too. I'd put that up there with seeing him put his glasses on when it comes to the actions I fangirl over the most. If only the object he was holding was a riding crop rather than a violin. Then I'd been in no fit state to play the piano, I assure you! I'm confident I'd struggle to breathe and would soon pass out. My word, just imagining it is giving me heart palpitations!

"Marielle," came a whispered rebuke from Lord Simeon, who had noticed me staring vacantly. "Stay focused, please. Is there any particular piece you're skilled at?"

"Yes, a piece," I murmured, suddenly knocked back down to reality. *He's right. This is no time to be fangirling.* "Let me think."

I gave him the name of the song I could play most proficiently. It was a well-known tune in triple time that wasn't especially difficult. Its sweet, cheerful melody was one I always enjoyed, which was why I'd played it more than any other. When writing my novels, I often thought of it, because it matched the image of innocent lovers that I held in my mind. In truth, it also had lyrics, and these were not innocent in the slightest, but rather heavy and passionate.

With a nod, Lord Simeon readied the violin and waited for me to begin. I turned to face the piano, took a deep breath, and softly put my fingers on the keys.

I began the quiet introduction, and it wasn't long before graceful music flowed across the room. The smooth, gliding tone of the violin was layered over the dancing piano melody, making a clear, light, and sweet waltz echo through the air.

Lord Simeon compensated for my clumsy musicianship with his violin. He exactly matched the timbre of my playing, and whenever I slowed down or sped up, he kept in time. As a result, the performance sounded beautiful even to me. My nerves dissipated, and I felt enough at ease to actually enjoy myself. This was a piece I was used to, after all, so I didn't need to stare desperately down at the keyboard. The tension left my shoulders and I took a glance at Lord Simeon.

The moment I did so, my fingers almost stopped moving altogether. In a

panic, I returned my attention to the keys and tried to make up for the delay, but I just couldn't concentrate anymore. My mind went blank and I felt certain I would forget the next part of the melody. Even so, I was drawn to look at Lord Simeon again, and did so against my better judgment.

I swear, why have I never asked him to do this before? We've had plenty of time during his vacation when I could have made him play for me. Why didn't I ever think of it? It's too vexing for words. He looks so dashing playing the violin, so beautiful, that it pains me not to be able to stop and focus on him entirely!

His head was tilted toward the violin resting on his shoulder, and his hair fell softly across the instrument's white body. Behind his glasses, his eyes were cast downward, hiding the severity of his usual piercing gaze and bringing a delicate side of him to the fore. He looked incredibly dashing when riding a horse, holding a sword, or giving orders to his men, but now I'd learned for the first time how wonderful it was to see him playing music. It was truly aristocratic, and yet his firm, trained body was still visible through his uniform, and the saber at his hip identified him clearly as a knight. I'd discovered a miraculous form of beauty where strength and refinement melted effortlessly into one another and coexisted in one glorious whole.

I so wish I could burn this spectacle into my eyes without restraint! Why must I play the piano? Why can't someone swap with me so I can simply admire Lord Simeon?

As I distractedly played, I made more than a few mistakes, and my frustration only courted further errors. Although I had at first been able to put on a reasonable performance by my own standards, it had all fallen to pieces in an instant.

I tried to focus on the piano again, but my fingers refused to move as my mind directed them and missed the correct keys again and again. My mind went blank again, though for a different reason this time—but I still picked up on the ringing laughter from someone nearby.

Oh dear, the queen will be furious! Rumors will spread that the new Mrs. Flaubert can't play the piano properly! I don't mind if people laugh at me, but I mustn't bring shame on my husband or his house!

Just as I was on the verge of tears, the sound of the violin shifted. Where before it had used the piano as its reference point, it now took the lead role. Alongside the main melody, my husband added ornamental flourishes that made for a sumptuous listening experience.

He must be improvising this! Lord Simeon, you are truly amazing to be able to adjust so perfectly on the spur of the moment. It's too much for me—I can't bear how perfect you are! Not that I'm not complaining, of course.

When I glanced at him again, his light blue eyes were looking back at me. They told me to calm down, reassuring me that everything was all right. His previous ill humor had disappeared in favor of a profoundly gentle gaze that spurred me on.

My heart was filled with two entirely opposite feelings: tranquility and turbulence. As he looked at me, my heart began to race uncontrollably, making all my annoyance pull away like a wave on the beach. This song about longing for the one you love, and wanting to be united with them, matched my state of mind exactly. I wished I could nestle close to this sound—his sound. I wanted to be exactly in sync with him, playing exactly the same tones.

Led by the expressive violin, my fingers danced across the keyboard. Like lovers holding hands and stepping in time, the piano and violin smoothly intertwined and enjoyed an elegant waltz together.



The final notes rang out, and the piece was over. I was so absorbed that I hardly realized it when a surprisingly loud applause reached my ears.

It didn't come only from those in the room. There was applause from the corridor as well. The thunderous sound restored me to consciousness, and I looked up at Lord Simeon. He lowered the violin and nodded, just the hint of a smile forming on his lips.

That was definitely a signal to me, wasn't it? A message telling me well done for my hard work. Oh, I'm so unbearably happy. If there weren't any other people around, I'd leap right up and kiss you.

"A rather good performance," said the queen, her voice filled with pleasure.

Flustered, I turned my head toward her. *Oh, that's right, I was playing in front of Her Majesty.* I'd been so enraptured by my husband that I'd forgotten.

She applauded as well and graced me with a smile. "That was most enjoyable. Thank you."

I stood up and bowed alongside Lord Simeon. "Oh, yes. Not at all."

"I fear it may have been a mistake to ask the lieutenant colonel to join, however. You got distracted and couldn't focus on your playing. Quite a misjudgment on my part."

Oh no! Did she have to make a comment on that!?

Giggles arose from the rest of our audience as well. In an instant my face turned red hot; I covered it with my hands and shrank back.

"I can hardly blame you," said Giselle. "He was a sight to behold."

Babette added, "I've seen Lieutenant Colonel Flaubert countless times before, but I was charmed by him in an entirely different way this time."

Their tone made it hard to decide if they were defending me or teasing me further.

Yvonne laughed cheerfully. "They are newlyweds, anyway. How can they help it? They'll find any excuse to be endlessly fascinated by one another."

The sounds of amusement around us grew even louder. Even the assembled

crowd of housemaids was laughing at me. I could hear them chattering, too.

“Even the choice of song was them showing us what lovebirds they are. They were doing it from the very start!”

“That takes some courage in the presence of Her Majesty. I suppose newlyweds really do only have eyes for each other.”

This only made it harder and harder for me to look up. *No, that's not the reason I chose it, I promise! I just didn't have any other options! Good heavens, why can't I just crawl under a rock somewhere? I want to be an insect that survives by hiding away.*

Ignoring the lively atmosphere in the room, Lord Simeon said indifferently, “I shall return to my duties now.”

He put down the violin and bowed to the queen again. His loud footsteps made a clear impact on the spirited onlookers, who quieted down and quickly made way for him.

Alain followed him, his face an equal mixture of awkward smile and abject terror. I watched my husband's abrupt departure with a feeling of great reluctance to see him leave. *How I wish I had more time to look at him. Why do we have to be parted again so soon? Doesn't he realize how lonely I am? He could at least turn his head to look back at me.*

Noticing my faintly sullen expression, Giselle said, “That's a love-stricken face if I've ever seen one. You can go and visit him when our working hours are over, you know.”

Everyone laughed at me again for being so head over heels for my husband.

Chapter Eight

Our performance passed enough time that it wasn't long until the afternoon arrived. Her Majesty went out, so I had some free time and went to look for Julianne.

In the end, she had not been summoned by Her Majesty all morning. It was hard to fathom what the queen's purpose was when the entire point had been, as the queen put it, for her to work "in close proximity."

I went around asking every housemaid I came across, and I was able to ascertain Julianne's location. To my surprise, she was in a small reception hall quite some distance from Her Majesty's chambers, which she was busy cleaning all on her own.

"Julianne!" I cried, running into the room.

She stopped working and stood up straight. Her long black hair was tied into pigtails and she was in the middle of washing the floor, a mop and bucket in her hands.

"Hello, Marielle. What's wrong?"

"What do you mean, what's wrong?" I started walking toward her in a hurry. "I don't understand what's going on. Why are you doing this sort of work?"

"Slow down! I just mopped there. It's slippery."

No sooner did she say that than my shoes slid on the floor. With a yelp, I splayed my legs open and somehow managed to regain my balance. *Thank goodness I have a normal dress on today!*

"Now that was impressive to witness," Julianne quipped. "I wish Lord Simeon could have seen it."

"I'd rather you didn't even joke about that! More importantly, what are you doing here? Have you been asked to clean up this entire room by yourself?"

"I was told I had until evening to get it all done. That's plenty of time, so it'll

be a walk in the park, honestly.”

“It doesn’t matter whether it’s a walk in the park or not!” I exclaimed as I reached her. After a moment to get my breath back, I asked, “Have you been in here alone all day?”

“No, I cleaned a different room this morning,” she said in a blasé manner, sticking the mop inside the bucket. It made a gurgling sound as she squeezed the water out, then she continued mopping the floor. “I also saw you and Lord Simeon’s stunning duet.”

“You were there? I had no idea.”

“Yes, I saw every moment. Even the part where you almost stopped playing altogether because you were too enchanted by Lord Simeon.”

“Don’t remind me of that!”

If Julianne was close enough to the queen’s chambers to attend the performance, perhaps Her Majesty was telling the truth about having Julianne work in close proximity to her. Still, I know she wasn’t actually watching Julianne work.

Beyond that, I began to wonder how Julianne must have felt seeing me at such leisure while she was forced to do household labor. Feelings of guilt rose up in me.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, my shoulders sagging.

Puzzled, Julianne turned to look at me. “Whatever for?” Her expression looked the same as always. Had she really not thought anything amiss?

“Surely you were bothered by seeing me at leisure when you’ve been made to clean? I was supposed to accompany you here in a supportive role, but I’ve brushed you off to spend my time relaxing. I realize how objectionable that must be. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to worry. Your piano playing was at Her Majesty’s orders, wasn’t it? She even summoned Lord Simeon to join you. I’d never dream of thinking you actually *wanted* to play in front of the queen. There are a thousand other leisure activities you’d choose above that.”

“That’s...true, yes.”

Admittedly, it wasn’t something I’d chosen to do. Still, to anyone watching, it would have looked like I was having the time of my life. By the end, I was rather enjoying myself, having become so entranced by Lord Simeon. How could I help feeling apologetic?

She looked at me silently for a few moments, then suddenly softened her expression and smiled wryly. “In all honesty, I was *slightly* jealous, but only slightly.”

“I’m sorry!”

“It’s fine. As I said, it’s hardly your fault. Besides, when you started making mistakes and you were on the verge of tears, I definitely wasn’t jealous of you anymore. You need to stop slacking and actually practice.” With a chuckle, she carried on cleaning.

I groaned self-consciously, but I was glad to have a kind friend who would forgive me with no more comment than that. Even when she was facing a tough situation, she never blamed others. I could see why His Highness was so taken with her. She was exactly the sort of strong-willed girl he preferred.

“It’s the first time I’ve ever heard Lord Simeon play the violin,” said Julianne. “Wasn’t he magnificent? He could pass as a professional musician.”

“He could, I’m sure.”

“Does His Highness play the piano, by any chance?”

“Yes, which was why Lord Simeon chose the violin, I’ve heard. They were rather like you and me.”

“Indeed.”

Julianne played the violin, and unlike me, she had practiced with enough dedication for it to become a skill she could be proud of. It was to the baron and baroness’s credit that they hadn’t sold off the instruments inherited from their forebears. The home tutor had only come until she was ten years old, but an older girl living next door had fortunately liked the violin as well, so she’d taught Julianne the basics.

The same young lady had also taught her the joy of reading. When she got married and moved away, she gave Julianne a large number of her beloved novels. This was a moment of great significance for fourteen-year-old Julianne, as her eyes were opened to a very specific kind of fiction.

In any case, it was thanks to her neighbor that Julianne had kept up with her practice and become rather adept.

I suggested, “Perhaps we can hear a duet between you and His Highness at some point. I can imagine he would be in my position—too absorbed in you to play without hitting all the wrong keys.”

“Certainly not,” she said in an upbeat tone. I didn’t have the impression that she was upset and putting on a brave face, which was a relief in a sense.

Still, I couldn’t simply accept the situation as is. “Getting back to the matter at hand, who ordered you to do this? It can’t have been Her Majesty, I’m sure.”

“Her Majesty has better things to do than fuss over every single room and who’s cleaning it. In any case, she hasn’t even summoned me once yet.”

“You still haven’t met her?”

“No. After I arrived yesterday I was introduced to the housemaids in charge of my instruction, and since then I’ve spent all my time doing tasks like cleaning and carrying.”

My mouth fell open. I understood why, being unmarried, she had been made a housemaid, but even amongst housemaids there were different ranks. The ones who performed low-level work like cleaning and carrying were invariably commoners. Though Julianne was from an insignificant house, she was still a noblewoman, and she’d been assigned to work here under the guise of etiquette training. Not to mention that even if it hadn’t been officially accepted yet, Julianne was a candidate for the hand of His Highness the Crown Prince, and was the woman he loved. For her to have been assigned physical labor was simply beyond belief.

“What’s going on?” I wondered aloud.

Has there been some sort of mix-up, or is this part of the queen’s plan? Is she somehow planning to use these circumstances to take stock of Julianne’s

character?

“Is she testing you by giving you menial work that’s below your station and finding out if you’ll work hard at it without complaining? Maybe it’s a trap, though—if you *don’t* object, perhaps you’re not noble enough? Oh no, what if my duet with Lord Simeon was specifically intended for you to see it? Her Majesty might be engaging in some underhanded behavior indeed!”

“Who can say? Personally I don’t have any idea how things work at the palace, but my suspicion is that you’re thinking too hard about it.”

She spoke as if this was someone else’s problem rather than hers. Even though she was the one most affected, and had every right to be offended, she remained indifferent. It seemed less that she’d serenely accepted the circumstances and more that she’d brushed them aside as a matter she didn’t care about one way or the other.

Confirming this, she continued, “I don’t really mind, in any case. I’m used to cleaning, and a room this size is far from an excessive workload. When it comes to carrying, the men take care of the heavier items anyway.”

“That’s beside the point!”

I was sure she understood what I was getting at, but she feigned ignorance and carried on cleaning regardless. This kind of practical hardheadedness was characteristic of Julianne, but I noticed a hint of disappointment hidden underneath as well. She coldly turned her back and kept on with her task, just as she always did. Looking the other way and ignoring the unpleasant truth was her habit and the way she had always protected herself.

I looked down at the floor and picked up the cloth next to the bucket. I dipped it in the side filled with clean water and squeezed it out, then set about wiping the chairs and sconces.

“Stop, there’s no need for you to help. This isn’t work a lady-in-waiting should be doing.”

“It’ll be quicker if we do it together, won’t it? I’ve been told to do whatever I want this afternoon, so I’m sure it isn’t a problem.”

“I was told that I, myself, have to clean this room. Besides, it’s—wait, what

are you doing!? That is *not* the correct way to wipe those! There's still dust left in the corners and at the back! You also didn't wring it hard enough. Look, it's dripping everywhere!"

"What are you talking about? It's hardly—oh, you're right. I'll wring it again."

"Even the way you're holding the cloth is wrong. Your hands are the wrong way around. Do it like this!"

Despite being a brand new recruit, Julianne instructed me like a confident veteran. When she'd said she was used to cleaning, it had been entirely truthful. After helping so much at home, she had reached a high level of mastery.

"You do realize that your help actually *increases* my workload, don't you, Marielle?"

"That can't be true. I admit I'm bad at this, but surely it's better than nothing."

"It is not! It's worse than nothing! You always made Natalie's life harder as well."

"Do you have to go that far!? Oh, that reminds me! Speaking of Natalie, I heard Mr. Satie finally bucked up his courage and proposed to her!"

"Really? That young man was bold and determined, but focused on his publishing company, as I recall. He didn't want to propose until he'd built his own office building."

"A rival appeared for Natalie's affections, you see. He started to get anxious, thinking that if he wasn't careful she'd be stolen away. The early bird catches the worm, as they say."

"Then congratulations to them. I'm happy for Natalie. She's always been so kind to me as well."

"There's something I wanted to ask you, actually. It doesn't have to be anything too grand, but could you make some sort of embroidery that could be framed as a present? Your work is always so impressive. I'll give you the cost of the materials, of course."

“I don’t think it’s all that impressive. It’s good enough to make some pocket money on the side, but nothing more.”

“If you’re able to earn money with it, that’s impressive in my book! I’m sure Natalie will be thrilled, and a congratulatory gift from the crown princess herself will be rather prestigious for Satie Publishing.”

Although Julianne had cheered up again, the last thing I said left her lost for words. She turned her back to me and continued mopping without interruption.

Resolutely ignoring the clear sense that she wished to stop the conversation at this point, I kept going. “Just think, this hall will go down in history as well. ‘The room that was cleaned by the crown princess herself,’ they’ll say.”

“Stop it.”

“It’ll be a tourist spot in ages to come.”

“Stop. I don’t want to hear such nonsense.” She didn’t raise her voice, but her tone was firm enough to stop me in my tracks. She rested on the mop with one hand and put the other on her hip, glaring at me sternly. “Enough is enough. The very idea of me becoming crown princess has been ridiculous from the outset. There is no way they would ever approve of me. How could they possibly? I knew that all along.”

“Julianne, please—”

“Don’t worry, I’m not especially hurt or downhearted. It’s too inevitable, too obvious, so the most reaction I can muster is to think, ‘Yes, of course. This is how I expected it would go.’ Her Majesty only wanted to bring me to the palace for the outward appearance of judging my character. It’s all a charade so she can say that she looked at me, but she just couldn’t accept me. I was no good after all.”

“I don’t think Her Majesty would do that. She can be strict, but I don’t think she’d behave maliciously or unfairly. She doesn’t seem like that kind of person.”

“I know. I don’t think she’s mistreating me really, or that it’s anything malicious on her part. She simply needed me to work here for appearances’ sake, nothing more.”

“Julianne, that can’t be true.”

“Honestly, it doesn’t matter.” She placed the mop down on the floor and walked over to me. Taking the cloth from my hand, she smiled gently. “It’s all right. I didn’t have any hopes to begin with, so there are none to be dashed. You don’t need to stay here to accompany me anymore, either. I’m sure you must be sad to be separated from Lord Simeon so soon after your wedding. He must be feeling lonely as well, so go back home as soon as you can. I’m sorry for making you join me here when none of it matters anymore.”

My friend, kind as always, was more concerned about me. However, the one feeling more sad and lonely than anyone was surely Julianne herself.

It can’t be true that she had no hopes to begin with. Even though she knew it would be difficult, I’m sure she believed in the possibility. The tears she shed in His Highness’s arms were no trivial matter. No one could experience that degree of joy without building up any hopes at all.

“What about His Highness?” I asked. “He’s determined to marry you. If you’re saying none of it matters anymore, are you giving him the cold shoulder?”

She paused and her amber-colored eyes wavered. It was clear that she hadn’t thought of it in those terms. However, she then bit her lip and nodded. “Yes. I’ve had enough of all this bother. After all the time I’ve spent with him, I’m sure His Highness has had his fill as well.”

Before I could respond to this untrue assertion, footsteps suddenly echoed across the room. Prince Severin appeared from behind the doorway with a look that said his movement was not intentional.

He really is awful at hiding his presence. I’m sure it wasn’t just me that noticed him there, but Julianne as well.

His Highness, unlike Julianne, wore an anguished expression. She looked away, not meeting his sad gaze.

“Julianne,” he began, but he was unable to say anything further, and walked over to us in silence. He stopped in front of Julianne and looked at her even though she wouldn’t look back at him. Their eyes did not meet. This one-sided gaze and heavy silence continued for a while, until suddenly His Highness’s

shoulders sank and he let out a breath.

“I say, I may be utterly worthless, but it still hurts to hear you say it.”

He spoke in a voice so despondent that I immediately felt sorry for him. My urge to butt in was powerful, but I fought against it with all my might. I knew he wasn't about to let it end this way. He wasn't that sort of person.

In a flash, His Highness had kneeled before her. He firmly lifted his head, trying to meet Julianne's gaze. In his eyes were a sage light filled with penetrating insight and a tenaciousness that bordered on obstinacy.

“I took charge of convincing the king and queen, but no sooner did I look away and look back than I found this shameful situation occurring right under my nose. I have no excuse for subjecting you to this pain and sadness. My own worthlessness has driven you into this frightful situation, hasn't it?”

“No, that's not true,” Julianne replied, hurriedly shaking her head.

He took her hand. In a panic, she tried to pull it back.

“No, you mustn't! Don't touch me, please! My hands are filthy.”

“I don't give a fig about that. In fact, I'd rather be filthy. If you're filthy and I'm not, how can I possibly feel at ease? I must be every bit as filthy as you are. For you to defile me would bring me the sweetest joy!”

“Stop phrasing it in such an easily misinterpreted manner! I'm covered in dirt from my cleaning work, that's all!”

She thrust the cloth she was holding into his face, and in the moment that he flinched, she seized the opportunity to brush off his hand. She drew back a few steps, and he laughed slightly, looking down at the cloth with a curious expression.

“Now there's an idea. Perhaps I should lend you a hand?”

“Don't talk nonsense. I refuse your help. I simply do not allow it. You're certain to be an even bigger impediment than Marielle.”

I couldn't let this go unremarked. “You *had* to say that, didn't you? How mean!”

His Highness stood. The cloth in his hand looked far too unbefitting of a prince, so I stepped forward to take it off him, then returned to my previous position.

“I must say,” said His Highness, “I’m flummoxed by the way you’re being treated. I’m sure that Mother—Her Majesty—has some sort of wily plan in mind, but I haven’t the foggiest idea what it might be. I am truly sorry. I’ll try to wheedle some information out of her and implore her to assign you to more fitting tasks. I ask you only to remain patient a little longer.”

“No, don’t, I—”

“Don’t say you’re giving up, I beg of you.”

Her urge to run away was visible in her eyes, but His Highness refused to ease off.

“No, that very premise is not quite right. You’d given up from the very first moment, hadn’t you? All along you’ve felt that it’s a losing bet—that you’d never be accepted. However, I never capitulated, so you were happy to keep our dalliance going. That, I was sure, represented your true intentions.”

She didn’t say a word, so he continued.

“However, I’d understood that you were receptive to my feelings. I thought that the only matter that still worried you was others’ acceptance of the match—that you fundamentally accepted me as a suitor and weren’t refusing to marry me as such. Was I mistaken? If I really was bothering you and nothing more, tell me. I want to hear your true feelings, not a deception meant to drive me away.”

Julianne didn’t answer. Of course she didn’t *really* feel that His Highness was bothering her, but she couldn’t bring herself to say so.

All along, there had been a spark of deep affection in her eyes whenever she looked at him. His Highness was not only dashing and attractive, he was also good-humored and kind. He was occasionally quite a fool, but always in a way that made him more endearing, and it reflected an earnestness that never faltered. Overall, he was the sort of person one grows to like more and more by getting to know him. If I hadn’t ever met Lord Simeon, and had just met His Highness

on his own, it was possible that I'd have fallen in love with him instead.

Any girl's heart would race if they had a man like that showing her all his attention and expressing his devotion to her. From the outside looking in, I could tell that Julianne had rapidly been charmed by him. She had simply denied it, even to herself, because accepting it was too dangerous. He was someone she could never marry, so she had given up on the prospect from the start.

If she let go of that sentiment, Julianne had no reason to decline his proposal. In all likelihood, though, the only one who could convince her was the man himself. I silently took a step back to give them more space.

"Julianne, if you could ever see me as your beau, I ask you to hold on rather than giving up so quickly. No, more than that—I beg you, please, don't abandon me!"

Your Highness, I must say, that sounds a little too pathetic!

It was valid, though. He needed the chance to show her she could depend on him. If, despite his deep yearning for her, he couldn't rescue her from her plight at this critical juncture, how could he be trusted to keep her out of harm's way at any other time? He had to show enough dedication that she would hold out until he could manage it rather than giving up.

Just like His Highness had before, I drew my body through the doorway and stood out of view, watching the two of them.

A voice said, "He really is determined, isn't he? It sounds a tad pathetic for him to say that so directly, but it is admirable that he's willing to go to such effort."

I replied, "Yes, he's taken a good look at Julianne's situation, and he knows he has to do something about it. There's something very precious about that feeling."

Julianne lifted her head and showed His Highness a smile. "I have no plans to abandon you. Nor do I particularly feel I've been driven into a frightful situation."

"Julianne, I mean it, I—"

“Don’t make that face. It’s quite all right, I assure you. Cleaning is a part of my everyday life. I don’t find it painful or upsetting in the slightest. No one is mistreating me, and my volume of work is the same as anyone else’s. I’m just here doing entirely normal work, that’s all. I’ll do as thorough a job as I can until I’m told to go home.”

His Highness sighed loudly. She had once again avoided giving a clear answer, instead dodging the key question of how she felt. No doubt His Highness had noticed this as well, but he backed down, apparently realizing that he wasn’t going to get anything else from her.

Importantly, though, she had left the possibility open. She hadn’t said she wished to end it now, which meant she hadn’t completely given up hope. Now it was time for His Highness to play his part. If he could show himself to be a man she could rely on, he would rapidly improve in her estimation. *Somehow you have to take the ever-pessimistic Julianne and make her see the good side! Please!*

The voice behind me spoke again. “Hmm, the situation is rather unclear. Is it mutual love, or unrequited love on his part? It’s hard to tell.”

“I’m certain it’s mutual,” I replied with a half-smile, looking at the couple. “Julianne is prudent to a fault, that’s all. She tends to expect the worst.”

Then I suddenly cocked my head. *Whose voice was that?*

I’d replied, but I didn’t even know who I was talking to. The voice was on the deeper side, and sounded oddly familiar even though I didn’t recall ever hearing it before.

I turned to look. Hiding behind the same door frame, peering into the room, was a man of my father’s generation, though slightly older. He had a tough, masculine face, with black hair and eyes. His features resembled those of certain other people I knew very well, and he bore himself with great dignity even while secretly peeking into a room.

When I realized who it was, I froze in position with my body turned halfway around.

With a playful wink, this man—this *very important* man—put a finger to his

lips and shushed me.

This can't be real...can it? What is happening!?

Inside the room, the two of them continued to converse. Since I was still stuck in my strange pose, I could only hear them, rather than see them.

"If I were to say that all life experience comes in handy eventually, normally I'd fear I'd let Marielle addle my brain too much, but it seems true at this particular juncture," said the prince. "Who'd have thought that your years of housework would be such a godsend at the palace?"

"Yes, if I were an ordinary noblewoman, I wouldn't even know how to mop a floor. I'd probably have cried over this meager amount of work, feeling as though I was being abused."

"That may well be, yes."

"Despite my parents' many faults, I suppose I should be grateful to them. Of course, it is their fault I'm in this situation to begin with."

Another man arrived and stood behind the one I was facing. He gave me a friendly wave. This charming older gentleman had the splendid aura of a knight about him, but his white royal guards' uniform was worn in a casual and unkempt manner. I couldn't remember ever seeing him dressed neatly.

"You're formidable indeed," said His Highness. "Despite it all, you don't seem to bear your parents any ill will. You don't see them simply as the ones who brought about your misfortune."

"I do wish they weren't so frivolous, but they're not all bad. They do have *far* too many bad points, of course! In the end, though, they are my family. I can't hate them."

"Quite so, yes."

They were quickly leaving the original topic behind, and the romantic atmosphere had vanished along with it. In the process, His Highness's voice grew less tense. He began to sound as though he was enjoying himself.

He continued, "I'm glad you're different from the average noblewoman, frankly. Wouldn't have it any other way. I'll talk to the queen at the earliest

opportunity and ask for you to be treated with the care you deserve. Please sit tight until then.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t be going anywhere. I must say, though, there is one small thing that’s bothering me.”

“Tell me.”

“I don’t mind doing an honest day’s work. Whether it’s cleaning, carrying, or otherwise, I’ll do my level best. However...will I be receiving payment?”

His Highness reacted with a strange sound of confusion—a drastic change from his newfound calmness. The two behind me let out quiet exclamations of “Hmm?” and “Oho!” respectively.

“What!?” Unable to believe my ears, I finally thawed out and turned to peer into the room again.

“Pay...ment?” uttered His Highness. Confronted with this entirely functional idea that was worlds away from all matters of dreams and passion, he couldn’t manage any other response.

With a serious expression, Julianne nodded. “Yes, payment. After all, being a housemaid isn’t volunteer work, is it? I’m quite certain that it’s normally a paid position.”

“Oh. Yes, uhm, that’s true, I’d wager.”

“I’d have expected to be told about my wages at the very start, as is only proper, but I haven’t heard a single word about the subject, so I’m beginning to feel concerned. Surely it hasn’t been assumed that I’d work for free? I understand the reason why I’ve been called to the palace, but doing all this work without being compensated for it would be completely unreasonable.”

His Highness nodded mechanically. Given how rationally and vehemently she made her case, he had no choice but to agree.

“I don’t demand an excessively high wage. If it’s the same amount as any other new recruit would receive, that would be plenty. It could even be reduced if this counted as a trial period. I wouldn’t mind. I don’t expect too much, only to be paid fairly. To come here I had to turn down some commissions for my

side job, and, well, there's a book coming out next month that I *have* to buy."

She balled her hands into fists and leaned forward eagerly.

"I've been waiting ages for it. I simply *must* have it. I don't want to miss my chance under any circumstances. I also want at least two copies—one to read and one to keep on the shelf forever. In an ideal world, I'd also like one more to use for evangelizing purposes."

"Evangelizing?" he murmured, blinking in bewilderment.

As someone who was likely to be a victim of her evangelizing, he seemed to more or less understand despite being stunned. Now that he understood the fangirl mindset, he was no longer someone who was simply shocked and overwhelmed.

"Understood," he said, recovering. "I'll take charge of that matter as well and find out what's what. In the event that no payment is planned, I'll compensate you from my own assets."

"Absolutely not!" she insisted. "Wages come from the employer! Though I suppose you are related to the employer, in this instance you're more on my side than theirs. If you bear the cost, it's still effectively unpaid labor on their part. You *must* arrange it to be paid from the palace coffers!"

Spluttering, he replied, "Indeed, quite right! I'll insist that you be paid a fair sum."

"Thank you."

As someone who had spent her life struggling for money, Julianne wasn't about to let a matter of payment go unremarked. Beneath her now meek-looking face, she was no doubt wondering how much she would earn and calculating how many books it would allow her to buy.

There was no longer the tiniest fragment of a sweet atmosphere hanging in the air between this supposed pair of lovers. *It really does seem as though patheticness is His Highness's best friend who follows him wherever he goes.*

The black-haired man behind me gave a brief chuckle, sounding rather impressed. "My own wife can be terrifyingly firm at times, but this one holds

her own. Impressive to leave a man his age cowering like that. At this rate it seems as though he might manage it on his own.”

After this last comment, spoken with a hint of laughter in his voice, the man gave me a light pat on the head for some reason, then turned around. Raising his hand as if to wave goodbye, he walked away. The knight accompanying him did the same and followed after him. I saw them off with a curtsy.

My goodness, I swear my heart almost stopped beating. How could I help being scared out of my wits when the king suddenly appeared behind me? For a moment I'd even tried to convince myself it was someone else who merely looked like him. I do wish he hadn't snuck up on me like that, but honestly, his playful smile did sort of make me start fangirling. Do I recall hearing that he has a blackhearted side as well? I can't stand it, it's too wonderful!

It seemed as though he might have come out of concern for Julianne. If so, perhaps she hadn't been coldly rejected after all. I hoped it was safe to believe that.

I felt more optimistic now. Although the queen was the one taking the initiative, this event was still enough to offer some hope. His Highness and Julianne had also come to more of an understanding and would put in the work they needed to. I was confident that it would turn out all right.

A different knight walked along the corridor in the opposite direction, passing the two men walking away. He quickly moved out of the path of his king and his superior officer, then stood and saluted them.

As he walked by, the Captain delivered a vigorous strike to Lord Simeon's body. Puzzled, Lord Simeon watched them go, then noticed me there and asked with his gaze whether something had happened. I smiled and shrugged, wondering how I could possibly explain it.

“Marielle, don't leave with that cloth!” called Julianne. “I need it back right now!”

“Yes, I'm coming!”

My friend was practically minded up till the very end. She didn't forget even the smallest details.

Chapter Nine

It seemed His Highness was able to keep his promise to make arrangements with Her Majesty. From the very next day, Julianne was assigned to the chambers of Princess Henriette.

Henriette, His Highness's youngest sister, had known all along about her brother's efforts to court Julianne and had been supporting it in secret. She was overjoyed that there had finally been progress in their relationship, and she welcomed Julianne with open arms.

When I went to see them, the princess spoke to me in her usual cheery and amiable tone. "Such perfect timing! Two of the housemaids assigned to my room recently got married and left, so I needed replacements." She turned to Julianne with just as much kindness in her voice. "Of course, I know you won't be here for too long, but I'm still more than glad to have you for now—even if it does feel rude to assign domestic tasks to my future sister-in-law."

"Please don't worry about that," Julianne replied humbly.

Princess Henriette's firm, well-defined features gave her a strong-willed appearance, but despite that, she was incredibly approachable. She wasn't the sort of princess who looked down on others due to her higher status, and in fact she'd been friendly to me since we first met. With her, I didn't have to worry about Julianne being subjected to any unreasonable treatment.

The princess had four ladies-in-waiting of her own, and aside from that had four housemaids to handle more menial tasks.

The latter worked on a shift basis in teams of two. Julianne's teammate was a girl called Nadia, who had recently been transferred from another section of the palace. Her light brown hair was tied into a tight bun, and she had a serious expression on her face. She looked familiar, and I soon realized that she was one of the housemaids Julianne was sharing a room with. She was around our age, but apparently in her sixth year of working at the palace.

Julianne gave a deferential curtsy to the princess and said, “My inexperience will no doubt lead to me making all sorts of mistakes, but I’ll serve you to the very best of my ability.”

With a laugh, Princess Henriette replied, “I’ve no doubt you will. Not that you’re inexperienced in the slightest, from what I’ve heard. Everyone’s deeply impressed with your performance when it comes to cleaning and tidying. You’re so attentive that you go around dusting and polishing things without even being told to. I only hope Nadia can keep up!”

Nadia, the target of this jibe, did not smile at all, nor did she even look at Julianne. She curtly replied, “Indeed.”

How odd. When I peered into their bedroom the other day, she was chatting in such a friendly manner, but now she has rather a cold and distant air about her. Perhaps she’s making an effort to appear suitably professional in front of the princess? She is at work, I suppose.

In stark contrast, a grin spread across the face of the princess’s trusted lady-in-waiting, Sophie. “I was wondering if your hands would be too dainty for an honest day’s work, but you haven’t complained even once. I wish you could work here forever.”

“My brother might have a thing or two to say about that!” quipped the princess.

The other ladies-in-waiting laughed in response. The atmosphere was so cheery that it was as if a field of flowers had bloomed in an instant. Although she and her mother were both women of the royal family, it made sense that the environment here was more lighthearted, given the princess’s youth. Her ladies-in-waiting were all young as well; even the oldest, Sophie, was only in her mid-twenties. Where the queen’s chambers had been characterized by a quiet elegance, Princess Henriette’s overflowed with lively energy.

We chatted for a while longer. Then, at one point, Princess Henriette turned to me with a look of sudden recollection. “Oh, you played a duet with Simeon yesterday, isn’t that right? What good fun! I only wish I’d been told it was happening. I don’t suppose you’d be willing to do an encore performance? I’d love to hear your beautiful music.”

Every pair of eyes in the room turned to look at me, some genuine hope mixed in with their teasing smiles.

Remembering how embarrassing it had been, I shrank back. “Mercy, please, I beg you. All I did was make one mistake after another. It was awful.”

Julianne shot me a disapproving glare. If the princess and her attendants hadn’t been there, I’m certain she would have made a very scathing comment indeed.

“All because you were gazing admiringly at Simeon, from what I hear,” said Princess Henriette. “How lovely it must feel to be just married. I hope I can marry Prince Liberto soon.”

“It’s planned for next spring, isn’t it? That’s a longer engagement than I expected.”

“I quite agree! I thought I’d be going to Lavia by winter.”

Her betrothal to the Grand Duchy of Lavia’s crown prince had been finalized at the start of the year, but it turned out that a princess’s wedding into another country’s ruling family took a very long time to prepare. Marrying after just over a year might have even been on the quicker side.

“At this rate, Severin will beat me to the punch. Oh, but if he does, Prince Liberto will surely visit to offer his congratulations. Either way, I’ll be able to meet him at last.”

She gazed lovingly at the small portrait placed nearby. Even though it was essentially an arranged marriage, and she knew him only through letters, Princess Henriette had worn her heart on her sleeve and fallen for him. Although it might not qualify as “love” yet, more as a yearning for him, it was still wonderful that she was able to so look forward to the day she’d marry him.

“He’ll have to get a move on, though,” she continued. “He’s nearly twenty-eight. Julianne, you have to marry him this year, for my sake!”

Her eagerness to meet her own prince had resulted in quite a demand. We could do nothing but laugh it off.

I replied, “If that’s what you want, you’ll definitely have to put in a good word

with Her Maje—gah!”

While I was mid-sentence, something touched my leg and I jumped in shock. I looked down and saw something soft and tufty poking out from beneath the hem of my skirt.

“Oh, Pearl, you naughty little thing,” said the princess. “My apologies, Marielle.”

I bent my legs ever so slightly and lifted up my skirt, revealing a small creature with long black-and-white fur and floppy ears. Pearl looked up at me with her round eyes and energetically shook her fluffy tail.

“A puppy!” I exclaimed. “What a cute little girl she is! You’re so adorable, yes you are!”

The audacious little scoundrel turned out to be a petite little puppy. She was so cute that I couldn’t help reaching out and cuddling her snub-nosed face. When I stroked her and ruffled her fur, she excitedly put her front legs in my lap and leaned forward.

“Who’s a good girl? You’re a good girl, aren’t you? Yes you are!”

“You like dogs?” asked Princess Henriette. “I thought you were more of a cat person.”

“I like both! My word, what soft fur she has. It’s like silk! Such a cute little girl. So cute, and so well-behaved!”

Pearl didn’t resist even when I picked her up. Small breeds have a reputation for barking at the slightest provocation, but she obediently let me embrace her without so much as a sniff. She was remarkably comfortable around people, even a stranger like me, and showed affection with her whole body.

“That’s her inborn nature,” said the princess.

“And Marielle’s,” replied Julianne with a wry smile. “She’s quite the animal lover.”

Nadia flashed a cold and disapproving glare.

The princess said, “Pearl was a gift from Prince Liberto, you know. Her breed’s still not especially common here. It comes from an eastern land.”

“What a wonderful gift,” I replied. “He must be looking forward to meeting every bit as eagerly as you are.”

“Do you think so? That’s a lovely thought. Nadia, come and put Pearl back.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Nadia agreed after a nervous pause. She seemed unused to handling dogs, and took Pearl off my hands in a clumsy manner. The way she held her was rather ungainly as well, resulting in the dog shifting uncomfortably in her arms. Nadia then went straight into the next room, half-running to avoid holding Pearl any longer than necessary.

This seemed like a suitable break in the conversation, so I took the opportunity to say my goodbyes.

Julianne’s settling in well, which is all I needed to see for now. She still hasn’t been granted a chance to meet the queen, but the situation could certainly be far worse, couldn’t it? I’m confident that things will be all right.

As I began to walk back to the queen’s chambers, Nadia came out of another door and flagged down a fellow housemaid who was walking nearby with a laundry basket. She added something that looked like a white cloth to the basket, then said, “Can you take this too, please?” Since she was no longer wearing her apron, my assumption was that it must have gotten dirty, so she had removed it to be washed.

She quickly went back into the room without a glance toward me. Apparently she was simply too preoccupied. It seemed odd, though, given how easygoing and sociable she had appeared just two days earlier.

That said, it wasn’t only Nadia that had a lot on her plate right now. It wasn’t long until the Foundation Day ceremony, when the kingdom’s founding would be celebrated, so the preparations had no doubt been added to their normal duties. When I looked out of the window, I saw some people atop the battery to the north. They were hard at work doing something—inspecting it, maybe? At the ceremony’s conclusion, a salute would be fired as the grand finale, so the battery had to be in top shape.

I couldn’t shirk my own responsibilities, either. With my task complete, I hurried back to the queen’s chambers. However, my duties continued to be decidedly limited, and I was given little more to do than hold the fort while Her

Majesty was out.

A few days passed in that same vein, until at last Julianne was given her chance.

Since Julianne's precise reason for being at the palace was still being kept confidential, a decision was made to avoid meeting anywhere too visible. Instead, it was arranged that Her Majesty would go to Princess Henriette's chambers under the pretext of discussing the Foundation Day ceremony.

I arrived early, having been charged with sending advance word of the visit. "It's been a long time coming. Are you nervous?"

Julianne, who was making tea in the kitchenette, wore a somewhat strained expression. "Of course. We can't all be as brash as you."

"How rude. I get nervous all the time, I'll have you know!"

"It certainly doesn't appear that way. Even at the palace, you wander just as blissfully as ever. Are you doing a lot of research for your writing?"

"If only I could. I long to explore and take in every single detail. I've never had a chance to see all the staff working behind the scenes at the palace. I'd scrutinize the kitchens, the laundry rooms, the offices—all of it. Sadly, I'm not free to do that. It's like looking at a delicious feast and being told I'm not allowed to eat any of it."

"I'm sure this goes without saying, but you absolutely must not go prowling around at night."

"Oh, what a good idea!"

"Don't even *think* about it, Marielle!"

"I'm only joking! Anyway, it sounds as though you're doing perfectly well." I smiled a little at her comments, which were just the same as always. "If you're comfortable enough to be yourself, it'll all go swimmingly. I've heard the things you say to His Highness, and if you can manage a tone like that with him, Her Majesty can't be much scarier."

"I wouldn't say—"

Her words were interrupted when someone entered the kitchenette. It was

Nadia, coming to drop off the cakes that would accompany the tea. She cast a sharp glance at us, silently put down her basket, then left.

With a shrug, I murmured, “Perhaps she saw us chatting and thought we weren’t doing any work.”

“I suppose you *had* better go out there soon. Her Majesty will be here at any moment.”

“True! Out of interest, have you and Nadia been getting along? The first time I saw her, she gave me a rather different impression.”

Julianne responded to my concern with a vague smile. “Don’t worry about that, just go. We both have a job to do.”

With that, she ushered me out. Her answer did little to reassure me, but she was right that I couldn’t be drawn into too long a conversation, so I returned to the neighboring sitting room.

The princess had several rooms just for her, which of course included a proper drawing room for receiving visitors. However, since this was to be a small family gathering, it was decided that the sitting room would be used instead. Another concern, in all likelihood, had been minimizing any chance of information being leaked.

Princess Henriette had already finished getting ready and was waiting for her mother’s arrival. The cute little doggy had been left alone in the bedroom. I bowed my head to greet the princess and her ladies-in-waiting, then stood beside the wall.

The guests arrived right away. Her Majesty and Prince Severin both entered, with several royal guards escorting them—including Lord Simeon! It was the first time I’d seen him all day.

“It’s good to see you, Mother,” said Princess Henriette. Then, seeing her brother ignoring her and darting his head about to find his beloved, she continued, “Don’t worry, Severin. You needn’t search so hard. She’ll be here soon enough.”

The group of ladies-in-waiting erupted into giggles. His Highness looked back at her petulantly while the knights behind him fought to restrain their looks of

amusement.

Only one person, my husband, had an entirely unruffled expression. *Either way, he looks as wonderful as ever. No, even more wonderful! Was he always this dashing? This perfect?* He glanced my way, so I furtively waved hello. Being forced to live apart from him made me lonely, but it also doubled or tripled the joy I felt on the fleeting occasions I could see him.

It feels as though we're lovers who have been torn apart, or who are forced to keep their relationship a secret! Imagining our lives as that sort of scenario made my heart begin to pound. *Your Highness, please don't look at me so bitterly! I'm not trying to flaunt our relationship. Lord Simeon's simply too alluring for me to react any other way!*

Noticing my reaction as well, Her Majesty said, "You've fulfilled your role as the advance party admirably. You may go to the lieutenant colonel's side, if you wish."

"Really? You don't mind?"

I would have been more than happy to do so, but Lord Simeon bluntly refused the offer. "Your concern is appreciated, Your Majesty, but I must focus on my duties."

After that, he didn't look toward me again. It was as though he didn't feel anything at all about our brief chance encounter. This time His Highness laughed smugly at my sullen expression. *Honestly, it's for your sake that I'm living separately from my husband so soon after our wedding! You could be a smidgen more grateful!*

With a smile that suggested she was slightly stunned at the display before her, the queen took a seat. The prince and princess sat down as well, and the three family members said hello to one another properly. Given the size of the palace, and the separate responsibilities they each had, it was inevitable that they didn't see each other very often. Her Majesty had a seat in parliament just as His Highness did. She had critically important meetings to attend and official business specific to her.

The royal family is surprisingly busy. It must be tough not being able to have a simple family get-together without specifically carving out time for it.

It seemed like just the right moment for tea to be served, so I looked over at the door leading to the kitchenette. Julianne did not appear, however. Flashes of nervous impatience appeared intermittently on His Highness's face.

I hope she's all right. She's usually ready to rise to any challenge, so I doubt she's cowering in fear, but I do wish I could make sure.

Before I could give in to my restlessness and walk back into the kitchenette, Nadia did so instead. It would have been an awkward moment for me to start moving, so I decided I'd leave it to her. For a moment I simply felt relieved that someone was checking on her.

To my surprise, though, Nadia immediately rushed back out. All present looked over, appearing just as confused as I was. Her behavior was so out of place that it drew everyone's attention. Despite being in the presence of royalty, she had impolitely thrown the door open with a clatter and come running.

"Restrain yourself, Nadia!" said Sophie reproachfully.

However, rather than stopping, Nadia made a beeline for Lord Simeon. "Vice Captain, take this!"

She presented him with the item in her hands—a teapot. Lord Simeon looked down at it quizzically. From her highly strained expression, I was quite certain she wasn't offering him a drink.

Sophie began to walk over. "Nadia, what on earth is the matter with you?"

"Please, you must investigate this. She put something in it. I saw it! I saw her do it!"

After this shocking accusation, she glared at Julianne, who now stood in the doorway, her face pale.

What? What is she suggesting?

"Julianne?" said His Highness, rising from his chair.

Lord Simeon took the pot from Nadia, removed the lid, and took in the scent. "It doesn't *smell* as though anything's wrong with it."

With a frenetic expression, Nadia insisted, "I'm telling you, she put something

in there!” From her agitated appearance, she seemed to be hinting that drinking the contents of the teapot would be fatal.

Is that what she believes? Is she saying there's poison in it? But...that's absurd!

I looked over at Julianne again. There was no way she'd have put any suspicious substances in the tea. How had this misunderstanding come about?

Lord Simeon asked, “Miss Julianne, did you put something in this tea?”

All eyes focused directly on Julianne. Her Majesty's face looked stern indeed. Under the weight of all these stares, Julianne looked down at the floor.



“No. I...I...don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

She nodded silently. Beyond that, she didn’t say a single word. His Highness watched her with an anxious look, and Princess Henriette appeared just as dumbfounded.

A heavy silence fell across the room. Lord Simeon passed the teapot to Alain, then walked briskly over to Julianne.

“Is this definitely the tea that you made?”

Still unable to look up, Julianne didn’t answer the question out loud, simply nodding instead. To me it was also clearly the pot of tea she’d just prepared. She’d boiled the water and added the tea leaves, just as anyone else would. Nothing more.

“She insists that you added something. Do you have anything to say on the subject?”

Julianne’s face screwed up in thought—a look that suggested she was deeply unsure of how to reply. After waiting for some time, Lord Simeon opened his mouth ready to speak again, but at last she replied in a quiet voice, “I was just making tea normally...but—”

“Liar!” Nadia interrupted. “You added some sort of powder! I saw it myself! It *clearly* wasn’t just tea leaves!”

Rushing over to stop her, Sophie said, “Be quiet, Nadia. Let Julianne answer the question.”

This rebuke did nothing to diminish Nadia’s fervor. “But it’s true! I saw it! Do you think I would lie about this!?” She pushed past Sophie’s attempt to restrain her and bore down on Julianne again. “If you *didn’t* put anything in it, you’ll be quite happy to drink it! Won’t you?”

Admittedly, it didn’t look as though Nadia was lying. Nor would it make sense to tell a lie that could be so easily proven in the royals’ presence. The most obvious conclusion was that she was telling the truth, which would mean that Julianne *had* done something suspicious—which I also couldn’t believe, of

course, but the gazes were growing increasingly intense.

Prince Severin was likely beset by the same feelings as I was. He was still standing up and continued to look at Julianne with great worry on his face. Though she had surely noticed, she resolutely did not turn to look back at him.

She looked up at Lord Simeon. “I ask you to examine the tea as well, please. I don’t know what could have happened, but if Nadia’s so insistent, perhaps there is something wrong with it. Given who was meant to drink it, it’s far better to be safe than sorry.”

“How utterly shameless! Do you truly think you can feign ignorance and get away with it!? I saw you add that powder with your own two hands!”

“Nadia!” cried Sophie.

“Don’t be drawn in by her little performance! She’s only making excuses—she’s clearly not willing to drink the tea. Why won’t she drink it? Just make her drink it! If she does, we’ll know straight away who’s telling the truth.” With a forceful air that brooked no objections, she demanded of Julianne, “Go on, do it! Right now! What are you waiting for, you—”

A loud *slam* silenced her. The queen had struck the table with her closed fan. With a start, everyone remembered where they were. Julianne looked toward the queen, and even Nadia stopped her ranting. No one spoke a word; all present grew still as Her Majesty rose from her chair.

“A change of plans is in order. Once the details become clear, we can begin again. For now, conduct a thorough investigation of the tea and the kitchenette. Lieutenant Colonel, I leave it to you.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

She nodded, then walked to the door, saying goodbye to Princess Henriette with only a glance. For a moment it looked as though Prince Severin might say something to stop her, but he quickly reconsidered and closed his opened mouth. Trying to stop her now would achieve nothing. There was no point in talking until it had been established whether anything had actually happened. And so, His Highness balled his hands into fists and restrained his emotions.

Since the queen was leaving with her ladies-in-waiting in tow, I should really

have joined her, but I was too worried about Julianne to move. Thankfully, I was not given any instruction to leave. It seemed only right that I should stay slightly longer to see everything that unfolded here.

On Lord Simeon's orders, some of the knights went into the kitchenette, and one left to get additional support. Lord Simeon himself turned to Julianne again and said, "I'd like you to come with me, please. I need you to tell me the story from your point of view." She nodded, and he said to Nadia, "You too, please. I'd like to hear your story again in full."

"Certainly."

He was starting to leave with them when Princess Henriette called out, "Wait!" Without waiting for his reply, she issued an order to her trusted confidant. "Sophie, go with them as well."

"Your Highness—" Lord Simeon began.

"Both Julianne and Nadia are *my* housemaids. This happened in my room. Are you suggesting that I have no right to speak on the matter? I'm not suggesting that I mean to interfere, only that the word of those two alone might not be enough to establish a clear picture, so I'd like Sophie to join them. What I'm offering is my cooperation."

Looking slightly troubled, Lord Simeon sighed. However, he didn't object any further, a sign that he had accepted her point.

He exchanged a quick glance and a silent nod with His Highness, then he left. The housemaids did as well, escorted by the royal guards, and Sophie followed. Julianne didn't look at His Highness—not even once, even at this very last opportunity. She only briefly glanced at me, smiling weakly as if to tell me she was all right.

His Highness, who watched intently as she left, heaved a huge sigh, and turned to his sister. "Who is that housemaid?"

"Are you referring to Nadia?" Princess Henriette replied.

The princess sat back down again, and His Highness did as well, flumping down into his chair. "I don't recall seeing her here before. She can't have been in your employ for an especially long time."

“She was assigned to me at almost the same time as Julianne. I was in dire need of new housemaids.”

“What’s her background?” he asked, his tone suggesting he was highly suspicious of her.

Princess Henriette furrowed her brow and glared at him admonishingly as if to warn him that it was too early to jump to any conclusions. “I’m told she’s a baron’s daughter, like Julianne. However, she’s worked at the palace for six years, and her record is exemplary.”

“What’s her relationship with Julianne? Any squabbling between them?”

“Are you suggesting that Nadia might be lying in order to frame Julianne? If so, there’ll be nothing wrong with the tea. We’ll know that as soon as the royal guards finish examining it.”

This left His Highness at an impasse. In the momentary lull, one of the ladies-in-waiting interjected, “If you don’t mind, I could provide a few more details about Nadia.”

Her mistress gave permission, so she began.

“She’s still young, being only eighteen, but she takes a serious and dedicated approach to her work, and has been appraised very highly. Whenever new housemaids are hired, there is a painstaking selection process. Their personal histories are investigated as well, of course. In Nadia’s case, she’s experienced quite some misfortune in her life. She never saw eye to eye with her stepmother after her father remarried, so she essentially came to work at the palace having been driven out of her home. Her family didn’t *entirely* cut ties with her, but apparently she hasn’t been home since she was twelve. That’s probably why she has no particular pride about her noble status and spares no effort in her work. She’s methodical, has a love of tidiness, and is meticulous when carrying out any cleaning task. As housemaids go, she’s outstanding.”

As I listened, I recalled the state of the kitchenette when I’d seen it earlier. Indeed, everything was arranged in a precise manner, and the cleaning had reached into every single corner. Julianne had probably cleaned there as well, but I didn’t think it could have been put into such perfect order by her alone.

No wonder Nadia scowled at us earlier. Being such a diligent employee, it would have been aggravating to see us chattering away during working hours. She's probably heard about Julianne's circumstances as well, so maybe she's predisposed to believe that Julianne wouldn't put in much effort. Perhaps that's also the reason for her change in attitude. She might find it disagreeable to be placed in the same position as a housemaid who's only here temporarily as part of a larger scheme. That would give her plenty of reason to dislike Julianne.

However, I was less sure that this was enough to make her cause a huge commotion and frame Julianne for such a crime. It would be one thing if she had a spiteful and frivolous nature to begin with, but it was hard to imagine such a devoted housemaid going so far just to bully someone.

"Marielle?" said His Highness, drawing me out of my sea of thoughts.

"Oh! Yes?"

"Does Julianne have any connection to Lavia?"

"Hmm? Lavia?"

It was a surprise to hear Lavia mentioned, so I stared blankly for a moment. However, I quickly realized what he was getting at. Indeed, regardless of the culprit, it was entirely possible that Lavians might orchestrate an attack on Princess Henriette, as not everyone was entirely accepting of her upcoming marriage into their ruling family. There were two factions, one of which was strongly opposed and could well be responsible for such a plot.

"To my knowledge, she does not," I continued. "I don't believe House Sorel has any relatives at all outside of the country."

"Yes, as I thought," he replied with a nod. Since he'd arranged a background check on Julianne, he knew this without even asking. His face grew even more troubled.

Princess Henriette raised a counterargument. "I wasn't the only one here, though. You were here as well, as was Mother. Any of us could have been the target."

"Leaving us with *far* too many possible culprits," said His Highness with a sigh. "Where to even begin?"

I nodded. *It's true.*

"Among other things," he went on, "there's a chance that someone is very grumpy indeed about the prospect of Julianne becoming crown princess."

His sister replied, "Perhaps, but her true reason for being here has been kept on a need-to-know basis. Those in my inner circle are aware of it, but I've instructed them to hold their tongues. Across the palace, it's still largely a secret. I can't imagine she'd be targeted so soon."

Hesitantly speaking up, I said, "I'd have to agree with Princess Henriette. The king and queen still haven't approved the match yet, and she's from a house that no one could consider a threat. Even for those who *do* know what's going on, they'd have no reason to plot against her."

"Hmm," he mused.

"The methodology would also be highly risky if Julianne was the intended victim. The tea was to be served to three members of the royal family, so even if the plan was for the gathering to be interrupted before you drank it, there was a chance that something would go wrong and you'd end up having some. No one would craft such a scenario if they only meant to dispose of Julianne."

"Yes, you raise a good point." He leaned on the armrest and rested his head in his hand, lost in thought.

Across the room, the knights were going in and out of the kitchenette. It was a small room, with the facilities for making tea and not much more. This in turn meant there was nothing obvious to be found in there beyond tea leaves, water, and cakes. The men came out with those items in their arms, and confirmed with the ladies-in-waiting that, to their knowledge, there was nothing they'd missed.

Prince Severin stood and told the ladies, "For the time being, that room is out of bounds. Something nefarious might have been squirreled away in there, so all entry is forbidden until the investigation is complete. Henri, you should be extra careful about your meals, too. Just in case."

Leaving one of the knights in charge, he left the room. Even though his face was pallid after this unimaginable development, he had already returned to his

typical level-headed attitude. He was probably anything but calm on the inside, but he maintained a respectful and dignified presence of mind. At moments like this, I admired the strength of his resolve.

Three knights remained and went into the kitchenette to give it a more thorough look, while the others escorted him out. Only women were left in the sitting room.

“What are your thoughts?” asked Princess Henriette, looking at me. She was clearly perplexed about what had happened, and I felt the same way.

“I don’t know if I can add much at this stage. I can affirm that Julianne wouldn’t dream of doing a thing like that, but as far as what *did* happen, I have no idea.”

“Is that a fair, impartial conclusion? Are you sure you’re not giving her the benefit of the doubt because you’re so close to her?”

In response to her frank question, I nodded firmly. “I’m sure. It’s not merely that I believe in her, but that I *know* her. It’s not mere speculation.”

Her eyes, dark like all those of the royal bloodline, stared at me penetratingly. I stood fast in the face of her gaze, which I knew would not permit any lies or deceptions. There was no need for me to fear her; I had no guilty conscience at all. When I looked back with the confidence that comes with complete certainty, a smile suddenly appeared on the princess’s beautiful face.

“I see. Then I’m sure all suspicion toward her will be cleared in short order.”

“I hope so too. Thank you.”

Relief washed over me. I smiled as well. *Like mother, like daughter, I suppose. Lavia will be getting a fine crown princess indeed!*

I couldn’t stay there forever, so I said my goodbyes, ready to leave. As I headed toward the door, I decided that I’d visit the Royal Order of Knights’ headquarters before going back to the queen. I was too worried about Julianne to do otherwise.

Walking at a brisk pace, I had almost reached the door when I heard a voice behind me.

“I bet it was an act of revenge,” one of the ladies-in-waiting whispered. Even though it was barely audible, every word reached my ears. “She must have been dissatisfied with being told to do an honest day’s work.”

Another of the ladies agreed with her. “She is a baron’s daughter, after all, even if she is from a house I’ve never heard of. If she’s a pampered young noblewoman, why wouldn’t she lash out in such a foolish manner?”

“Just imagine how angry she must be, treated as a housemaid when His Highness has proposed to her.”

My instinct was to stop and listen for longer, but I forced my feet to keep moving and exited the room.

I couldn’t stand them making such horrendously false assumptions. Julianne was *not* a fool. She was highly prudent and cautious to the point of being rather pessimistic. She was also far from pampered, with life experience that had given her great wisdom. Thoughtlessly lashing out would never enter her mind.

Above all, she has too kind a nature to even consider such an act!

The urge to voice my objections burned within me, but I had to hold back. It was inevitable that some onlookers would have ideas along those lines. If I were in their shoes, it was entirely likely that I’d have thought the same.

It’s all right. Her innocence will be proven straight away, I’m certain of it. Julianne definitely didn’t do anything, and Lord Simeon would never assume anything. He’ll investigate properly and find out the truth.

I hurried to the knights’ headquarters, located to the side of the palace. This building, with a roof the same shade of blue as that of the main palace, was one I’d visited many times since first getting engaged to Lord Simeon. So used to the approach by now that I barely thought anything of it, I walked toward the front door, expecting to enter freely as always. However, there was someone waiting outside when I arrived.

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” he said.

It was Lord Simeon, who I’d expected to have already begun his questioning. He stood there with folded arms and a stern expression, like a father waiting for a daughter who had broken her curfew.

I stopped, rather surprised to see him. “Lord Simeon?”

“Did Her Majesty permit you to come here?”

His glare made me flinch. He’d also raised a point that I couldn’t argue against. I had no way to deny that I’d gone there entirely of my own accord.

“Well, n-no, but I’m worried about Julianne. I wanted to see how the investigation is proceeding.”

“So far it’s not proceeding at all. The questioning is due to start soon, but we have nothing to report yet. Surely you realize that.”

“I thought I might be able to observe, perhaps.”

“There’s no need for that. Nor can I permit it.”

The words were a curt, point-blank refusal. His cold words and colder demeanor left me rather sullen despite knowing that I was in the wrong. Part of me wanted to argue with him, but it was clear in his cruel eyes that he had no appetite for this. I shrank back, too stunned to say what I was thinking.

“Go back to Her Majesty. Your working hours haven’t finished yet, have they? When you’re at work, you can’t simply abandon your post whenever you feel like it.”

“I didn’t abandon my post. My real task is to watch over Julianne and to give her someone to talk to. Weren’t those the queen’s orders?”

The reasons I had come were not frivolous at all, so I made my objection known. I wasn’t simply entertaining myself and gathering reference material or some such.

Even so, Lord Simeon’s attitude remained the same. “That argument might hold more sway if she had specifically told you to come and observe the questioning. As it is, you must leave. You should hurry back to Her Majesty right now and apologize for ignoring your duties and wandering off on your own. The title you’ve been given may only be for show, but you still have a responsibility, and you need to be aware of that.”

Issuing this statement with a tone that felt like a slap to the face, he turned around without even a word of goodbye. There was nothing I could say, and he

didn't look back even for a moment. I had no choice but to silently watch him enter the building and leave me behind.

Chapter Ten

Driven away and abandoned, I was forced to return to the queen's chambers just as I had been told. I trudged along the corridors of the palace with heavy steps owing to my supremely dispirited mood. The response I'd received had been far frostier than I'd ever have expected.

What Lord Simeon had said wasn't wrong, of course. I should indeed have asked the queen first, but I had prioritized my own feelings and acted without authorization. In doing so, I was definitely at fault. I was using my role at the palace as an excuse—in truth, I wanted to see her because I was worried about her; that was all.

Hopefully if I apologize profusely to Her Majesty, she'll forgive me.

Why had I wandered off without permission? It seemed obvious now that I would be told off for that. The situation was hardly an urgent matter of life or death. By this point, I was filled with remorse, and hung my head as I walked.

I really have had too little awareness of my duties. The queen said I would be serving her only as a pretext, so I took the position of lady-in-waiting far too lightly.

With no time to lose, I hurried myself along. Her Majesty, Yvonne, and the other ladies-in-waiting had probably long since returned to the queen's chambers. I wondered what they must think of me now that I had disappeared without a word. Just as Lord Simeon said, I had to get back and apologize right away.

Even a fast walk seemed too slow, so I hitched up my skirt and quickened the pace to a light jog. For now, I decided I would try to forget about the pain in my heavy heart and focus on getting back to my post.

And yet, I simply can't get Lord Simeon's cold voice and gaze out of my head no matter how hard I try.

In an attempt to forcibly cheer myself up, I lifted my head, which had been

focused firmly on the ground. When I did so, I saw some men walking in the opposite direction.

They were too finely dressed to be members of staff. It wouldn't do for me to be running in front of others, so I slowed down, then moved over to the side so we'd pass each other more easily. Soon the distance between us closed, however, and I saw their faces. I stopped and quickly moved over to the wall. Just as any staff member would do when encountering a group of high-ranking noblemen, I lowered my head to show respect and waited for them to pass by.

One of them spoke in a low voice with a more charming ring to it than his relatively unassuming appearance would suggest. "Well? Did you find out what happened?"

Another of the men replied, "Not yet—not in detail, at any rate. All I know is that something unexpected happened when they gathered in the princess's chambers."

This startled me. Were rumors spreading already?

He continued, "I heard that Her Majesty returned to her own chambers almost immediately."

"A sudden bout of ill health, perhaps?" asked the third gentleman.

However, this was quickly denied. "That doesn't seem to be the case, no. One of my underlings saw her walking normally."

"Oh, I see."

The words alone might not have come across as especially worrying. One might assume they were concerned about the queen's health. However, an undertone in their voices made it clear that they had quite the opposite in mind.

"Then she'll be able to attend tomorrow's council meeting as planned, I assume."

Their footsteps came ever closer. Though they must have seen me, they showed no sign of halting their discussion.

"Since the monarchist faction persists in sitting on the fence, getting this bill

passed looks to be a tough prospect. The king, the queen, and the crown prince... If all three of them are present to give their votes, it's probably a lost cause."

"Personally I think that's a ridiculous arrangement to begin with. All it does is inflate their number of votes. The royal family always opposes us, so it should be whittled down to a single vote from the king himself. Not only his son having a seat, but even his wife, is blatantly unfair."

Making no attempt to conceal their rather brazen discourse, they walked past me. *Are they really so unconcerned that they might be overheard expressing such ideas?* The eyes of the man at the head of the party took me in only for a second before looking away.

The two behind him continued their conversation.

"Women shouldn't be involved in politics at all. They should keep to matters of society. I'm sure Her Majesty finds it equally tedious, were she to be honest about it. Women like to talk about new dresses, the latest fashionable hairstyles, that sort of thing. All talk of politics must be far too complicated for them, not to mention dreadfully dull."

"It would be easier for us if she did fall ill for a while. I don't know exactly what the earlier commotion was about, but, well, that might be something to consider."

Surely they must realize that's going too far!

In the same moment I had that thought, a low voice interrupted, "Restrain yourselves."

The wanton chatter stopped sharp and the man walking in front cast his eyes around cautiously. He didn't say another word, just continuing to walk without even turning to look at his companions. The other two exchanged a glance, then followed in silence.

I raised my head again and watched them go into the distance. *Parliament's reformist faction seems to be taking advantage of the king's magnanimity to make some awfully forthright statements. There was a line they didn't cross, but only barely. If they'd been alone, I'm sure Marquess Rafale wouldn't have*

stopped them.

Though Marquess Rafale had stayed silent during the uninhibited discussion, he was the one I found the most ominous. He was an ambitious person scheming to abolish the monarchy and seize power, so I didn't like to imagine what he might think of the royal family. His handsome face was so expressionless that it was impossible to guess what was on his mind. He was also thoroughly devoted to the political sphere and had very little involvement with society, so I'd had few chances to observe him and hadn't collected much information.

As grating as it was to hear us described as having no interest in anything but fashion, I had to admit that politics was a difficult subject for women to talk about. This was hardly a surprise, since we were never given any opportunity to learn about it. If a young lady showed an interest in politics or economics, she was invariably dismissed as charmless and impertinent. *I'd appreciate it if men didn't mock us for a tendency THEY created, thank you very much!*

They had mentioned a council meeting. *Yes, I do recall that being on the schedule for tomorrow.* It was entirely possible that someone was plotting to prevent the royals from attending, as per the men's discussion. As I resumed my journey, I considered this. It seemed like a far more plausible explanation for what had happened than Julianne having been the intended victim. Still, it seemed awfully careless if so. If the queen and crown prince collapsed, the council meeting would likely be called off anyway, and the most obvious suspects would be the reformist faction.

I want to ask Lord Simeon for his thoughts on this. Alas, the moment I had that thought, I remembered what had happened. *My goodness, nothing is going to drag me out of this despair, is it?* He'd been far colder than in his usual lectures. I couldn't help feeling a deep sense of unease, as though he might have developed contempt for me.

When I reached Her Majesty's chambers, I entered with some embarrassment and lowered my head on the spot. "I'm back. I can only apologize for wandering off on my own."

"Oh, yes, welcome back."

Though I'd prepared myself for a telling off, the voice that greeted me had a chirpy tone with no hint of anything wrong. When I looked it up, it wasn't the queen I saw, but Yvonne, busily moving around along with her fellow ladies-in-waiting.

They were laying out a grand selection of cosmetics and accessories, all focused around a spectacular dress that I could tell at first glance was for a ball. Tonight Her Majesty was going to visit Duke Chaliar, whose house her oldest daughter, Princess Lucienne, had married into. Evidently, they were making preparations for that.

The ladies only glanced at me briefly and did not speak a single word of censure. I didn't even have the impression that they were in a foul mood and ignoring me. Rather, they seemed to be in an entirely normal state of mind. *Are they simply too busy to think about it? I can't imagine that's true, though, when they haven't even started getting the queen dressed yet.*

"Where is Her Majesty?" I ventured timidly, baffled by the situation.

In an amiable tone, Yvonne answered, "She went to visit His Majesty."

"Was it about what happened earlier? Is she letting him know about it?"

"Who can say? I'm afraid I didn't ask."

Though she spoke without any hint of annoyance, she was certainly being more curt than usual. The others, too, were hardly talking at all as they worked, when they usually chattered in such a lively manner.

The atmosphere was somehow uncomfortable. Nobody leveled any criticism at me, or showed any look of displeasure on their faces, but there was nothing reassuring about this ending without me receiving any kind of rebuke. I thought I'd be swamped with questions about Julianne, berated for disappearing, or at least subjected to some cutting remarks.

Perhaps this isn't a situation where I should expect that after all? Still, it's disconcerting for them to act as though nothing is wrong after such a major event. Even if they aren't going to focus on me, I'd at least expect them to be gossiping about what happened and who might be to blame. Or maybe the queen's ladies-in-waiting aren't supposed to engage in such chatter? Now that I

look properly, their indifference does look a little forced. Is it simply their professional decorum?

I stepped forward, unable to feel at ease when everyone was working and I was just standing there. “Is there any way I can help?”

Even this brought on no resistance and no sign of any bitterness. “Absolutely. Would you mind tidying those away?”

Yvonne pointed to some clothes that had just come back from the laundry. I lifted up the pile and took it into the wardrobe.

The queen didn’t wear things only once and then abandon them. From dresses to underwear, she treated every garment as valuable and wore them all again and again. Everything in her wardrobe was of the highest quality, as befitting her status, but she steadfastly avoided any unnecessary extravagance.

She definitely was not the sort of woman who had nothing in her head but fashion and society, as the reformist faction had suggested. I was sure she knew a great deal about politics, in fact. Seeing her close up had made her wisdom abundantly clear. As such, I was highly intrigued to find out what she thought of the day’s events—and what her perspective on Julianne was at present.

In the end, though, I didn’t have a chance to ask her that day. When she returned, dressing her to go out became a matter of urgency, and then she left with Yvonne and Babette. She told the rest of us that we could do whatever we liked after that, so I decided to simply return to my room. Cleaning the chambers while Her Majesty was out was the housemaids’ task, so Giselle and Noella retired as well.

When I returned to my assigned bedroom, Joanna was there, having readied the room for my return. As she prepared dinner, she expressed her approval of my efforts. “Well done on completing another day’s work, my lady. How are you finding it? I can imagine it’s rather a struggle with all that you have to get used to.”

Though I appreciated her concern, it felt somewhat wasted on me. *I’m not doing anything especially taxing. The tasks I’ve been asked to help with are so simple as to barely even count as work, to be honest. I suppose my role as a lady-in-waiting is only a temporary one and just for show, so no one can be*

expecting me to work too hard.

On reflection, the way I was being treated was more akin to a guest than an employee. *Perhaps that's why I wasn't told off today*, I thought to myself with a sigh. *If they never had any expectations of me to begin with, the reactions of Yvonne and the others make perfect sense.*

Here I was being shown every kindness, and even having a servant take care of me when I returned to my own private bedroom. How was it any different from being at home? For me, life in the palace wasn't a challenge at all. The one who was really struggling was Julianne.

After dinner I took a refreshing bath, then got into my nightclothes. It was around the time that everyone in the palace would start getting into bed, so I told Joanna she could retire as well. However, I didn't actually feel like sleeping yet. My mind was still racing.

What happened after Julianne and Nadia were taken in for questioning? By now they must be long since finished with that, so was Julianne allowed to return to her room? Perhaps I could go and check on her now. She won't be alone, I presume, since she's sharing a room with other housemaids. Oh, that's a point—Nadia is one of her roommates. They can't be sharing the same room tonight, though, can they? It seems far too awkward, cruel even, to force them together.

Nadia had insisted that Julianne had intentionally mixed a harmful substance into the royal family's tea. If she told the other housemaids, putting Julianne in the room with them would be like throwing her to the wolves.

All of a sudden, I couldn't contain my urge to go and check, so I picked up a shawl and went over to the door. Leaving my room dressed like this was improper, but this section of the palace was home only to female staff, and given the late hour, almost everyone would be in their rooms anyway. Getting dressed again felt like unnecessary fuss, so I decided not to bother and simply flung the door open.

When I did, I jumped with a start. A man was standing right outside the door. He looked at me with a somewhat shocked face as well, since the door had opened so suddenly.

“Lord Simeon?”

Towering before me was a tall gentleman in a white uniform. In a strange coincidence, I had set off at exactly the moment he had been about to put his hand on the doorknob.

Recovering from his momentary shock, he furrowed his handsome brow when he noticed my appearance. “Do you seriously mean to go out dressed like that?”

“Oh. Well...”

I hurriedly wrapped the shawl around myself. This wasn’t much help, though; it was a summer shawl made of sheer fabric and delicate lace, so even when I gathered it up in the front, it did little to cover me up.

Although I’d thought it unlikely that I’d bump into anyone at this time of night, I’d done so as soon as I opened the door. *Perhaps I should be glad it was only Lord Simeon?*

Without a word, he put his arms around me and pushed me back inside the room. Then he closed the door and heaved a typically exasperated sigh.

“This isn’t your own home. It’s beyond careless to go wandering around at night, especially dressed in your nightclothes. There are vast numbers of men here, too. What if one of them assaulted you?”

“Hold on a moment—*that’s* what you’re worried about?”

I’d expected him to chide me for being immodest, but he’d taken it in a rather unexpected direction.

When he cast a sharp glance at me, I shrugged. “Honestly, I can’t imagine anyone would want to assault me.”

“Must you persist in saying that?” he said with a hint of annoyance.

He reached out and pinched my nose. *Ow, that hurts!*

“Abandon this strange notion of yours that you’re undesirable. For men, it’s more than enough for you to be a young woman. Your looks and your body hardly matter at all.”

As I rubbed my nose, I grew rather offended. *Really? You're not only taking aim at my appearance, but my figure as well? I wasn't intending to make quite such a harsh comment about myself. I'll admit I am tragically lacking in curves—trust me, I know that better than anyone—but if you felt a need to say it, does that mean it's not enough for you either, Lord Simeon?*

“Oh no, if only I could find a way to make my bust bigger. You know, I've heard of a strange treatment they use in the Far East that involves inserting needles into the body. Apparently it can cure lower back pain and stiff shoulders! I wonder if it could be used to give me an ample bosom as well? I'll have to look into it!”

“What on earth does that have to do with what we were discussing!?”

Just as he made that remark, a gentle knock came at the door. Although Joanna had already withdrawn to her neighboring room, she appeared once more. “You ought to be more quiet at this hour,” she warned.

Lord Simeon awkwardly cleared his throat.

“Shall I boil some water?”

Joanna was in her nightclothes as well, but she had already prepared tea for Lord Simeon's visit and brought it in with her. *If she'd have to boil more water, does she mean for a bath?*

Shaking his head, Lord Simeon, replied, “No, thank you. I already bathed at the Order's headquarters.”

Although there was a bath here, it was rather modestly sized. It wouldn't be enough for a man whose work involved physical exertion, which was no doubt why he had taken a bath before coming. Looking closely, his hair was still slightly damp.

“We can manage everything else on our own,” he continued, “so you may go to sleep. Sorry for bothering you so late at night, and thank you very much for the tea.”

After setting the cups down, she bowed her head. “As you wish. I'll be going then. Good night.”

With that, she left the room. She was a highly conscientious lady's maid, not expressing the slightest curiosity as to why Lord Simeon was there in the first place.

I had wanted to ask about that since his arrival, in fact, but I seemed to have missed my chance. He'd started lecturing me from the very first moment, and before I knew it, I'd gotten carried away into fantasy land. Now I didn't know how to broach the subject.

While I stood and pondered this, he removed his saber and put it on the nightstand. He also took off his jacket and gloves, leaving him dressed rather casually, and sat down on a chair. Not saying a word, he simply drank his tea. His calm, levelheaded attitude left me perplexed. What had happened to the cold demeanor from earlier that day? He'd driven me away so pitilessly, and yet the tense edge of anger had now vanished completely.

The silence in the air was uncomfortable as well, so I timidly asked, "So, you...haven't been home yet today?"

In a perfectly normal tone, he replied, "I'm staying the night."

"I see."

Is that because he has a night shift today? He's mentioned before that he has to stay at the palace overnight on occasion. However, a night shift would normally involve starting in the evening, wouldn't it? Perhaps he has to work late due to the day's events. That must be exhausting.

His profile, glowing in the lamplight, looked as dignified as always, showing no sign of fatigue. However, he did have a certain air about him—that of a husband relaxing in his bedroom, alone with his wife at the end of the day.

Wait a moment. Does he mean to sleep here, in this room? Is that what he meant by 'staying the night'? My word!

"Shall I...lock the door?" I asked, unable to form the question directly.

He nodded. "Yes, indeed. We won't be calling Joanna again, so please go ahead."

"All right." I went over to the door again and locked it tight.

So he really does intend to stay here. Is that allowed? We are married, of course, so there's nothing to feel guilty about as such...but, well, it isn't our own home. Surely it's some kind of contravention of workplace discipline?

I didn't want him to leave, however. It had been days since we'd been able to spend the night together. I was more than just happy about it. My heart was beginning to pound and I could feel my face heating up.

"Is there something wrong?" asked Lord Simeon after I spent a moment too long hovering by the door.

Flustered, I turned around. "N-n-no, not at all! So your reason for staying overnight isn't because you have a night shift?"

"No, I've finished my work for the day."

"Glad to hear it. And...*this*...is allowed?"

Despite my euphemistic way of phrasing the question, he understood what I meant. With a hint of embarrassment on his face, he chuckled and said, "It's outside of working hours for both of us, and we're married, so there's no reason anyone should object. Just in case, though, I did get permission."

"You told someone about it? Who!?"

"The head housemaid. She's the one with the highest level of responsibility for the female staff's living quarters. Ladies-in-waiting are treated somewhat separately, but I didn't feel as though it was a matter to bring up with Her Majesty."

"Goodness, no."

I swear, what is going on? Someone else already knew that Lord Simeon would be staying the night with me? That's too embarrassing for words! Though admittedly, I doubt anyone with a title like "head housemaid" is going to start gossiping about it.

I'd read about cases like this in a book before. In a faraway eastern land, there's apparently a form of marriage where the husband doesn't live with his wife, but merely goes to visit her. Even if she's serving in the imperial court, at night the husband is permitted to see her and stay the night. I'd found it to be

rather a surprising custom, and had never expected to experience it myself.

What? But it's so sudden! I don't feel ready!

I was glad I'd taken a bath and left my work clothes behind. Joanna had also neatly combed my hair, and I'd even applied a skincare treatment. Still, if I'd known this was going to happen, I'd at least have wanted to use soap with a nicer scent.

Watching me fidget, Lord Simeon asked quizzically, "What are you doing?"

He was treating this scenario with so little concern that it seemed ridiculous for me alone to have lost my presence of mind. *Honestly, do you have to look so relaxed about this?*

I came back and sat down on the bed. "You could have told me you were coming."

"It was a spur of the moment idea. I merely thought it would be better for us to be together tonight." As he spoke quietly, he put down the cup. The eyes that had seemed so terribly cold during the day now gazed at me kindly.

So he hasn't forgotten about earlier. He didn't intend to push me away like that and then resolutely act as though nothing was wrong. The joyful realization that he *hadn't* developed contempt for me, that he *did* still care, made my heart grow light.

"Did the queen say anything about you abandoning your post?"

"No," I replied after a pause.

"How about the other ladies-in-waiting?"

"No, no one said a word."

Lord Simeon nodded. "Indeed, I suppose they wouldn't."

Seeing the complete lack of surprise on his face, it dawned on me. "You knew, didn't you? You knew, even though I'm officially a lady-in-waiting, I'm being treated more like a guest, so I wouldn't be chastised."

"Yes. Her Majesty said as much from the start, so no one was likely to complain about you abandoning your post. I imagine you haven't been given

any important work to do, either. Is that right?”

“It is,” I admitted reluctantly.

Indeed, I’d only been asked to help with trivial errands and little bits of tidying up—nothing beyond that. Though I’d rushed back to the queen’s chambers, there hadn’t exactly been piles of work waiting for me.

“If you knew that, why were you so stern in insisting that I return to work?”

“To put it simply, because it’s your duty.” He stood from his chair and walked over to me. “Even if it’s only a pretext, you’re still serving as a lady-in-waiting. Are you so unwilling to commit to the mindset and behavior required of such a role?”

“Well, no, but...”

It wasn’t that I couldn’t accept it. Regardless of how the queen saw my position, I didn’t think it would be commendable to behave too irresponsibly. Only, I hadn’t merely been dilly-dallying earlier. No matter how hard I thought about it, that feeling remained. Of course the specifics of my behavior had been a mistake; I should have gotten permission from the queen before going, and I shouldn’t have tried to make excuses for my negligence. If he’d just lectured me about all that, I wouldn’t have been so bothered by it. However, his attitude had been so cruel that I genuinely thought I’d lost his favor.

Lord Simeon took a light breath and sat down beside me. He drew in close enough that we were touching and took the hand I’d left lying on the bed. His gentle warmth surrounded me, making it abundantly clear that he wasn’t upset with me.

“How do you feel about the fact that you weren’t disciplined? Are you happy about it? Do you see it purely as a good thing?”

“On the contrary. It makes me feel quite uncomfortable. It’s not only that no one told me off, but that I wasn’t asked anything about Julianne, either. Perhaps they couldn’t talk about it during work, but I couldn’t help finding the situation very awkward indeed.”

When I gave voice to the doubts I’d been harboring all afternoon, Lord Simeon smiled, somehow satisfied. He lifted up my hand and kissed it.

“I see you understand. After all, you’re neither an irresponsible person nor a superficial one who cares only about having special privileges. You’re a person of sound mind and honorable intentions, able to admit your own faults. You often act rashly, which is a flaw, certainly, but once you’ve calmed down, you’re able to discern what you’ve done wrong. The reason I spoke to you that way is because I firmly believed that.”

Though he admonished me, his voice was as soft as a loving caress.

“For noblewomen, who don’t really need to work, a position at the palace is often no more to them than a feather in their cap, or perhaps a necessary evil with some other goal in mind—etiquette training, forming connections, and so on. There aren’t many for whom the job itself is the goal. They arrive with the foreknowledge that they won’t work here for long before quitting. For those ladies, work is, to put it less than flatteringly, a stepping stone and nothing more. They have no desire to carry out their duties with any real care or sense of duty.”

“I can see how that might be the case.”

“The queen and her ladies-in-waiting see you as someone along those lines. It’s nothing to do with you in particular. They’re aware of the circumstances and have built up a certain degree of tolerance. However, I’d like it if you didn’t take advantage of this and use it as an excuse to shirk your duties. My preference would be for you to have the sense of responsibility that one *should* have in such an important position. Even if it’s temporary and no more than a pretext, you’ve still been given this title, and I want you to endeavor to live up to it. That’s the mindset with which I spoke to you earlier.”

His striking light blue eyes looked at me from only a short distance away. These words, all about not being swayed by the fickle currents of the world around, were a natural fit for the overly serious Lord Simeon.

His kind tone and gaze made me comfortable pleading my case. “It’s fair enough for you to rebuke me, I only wish you hadn’t done it in quite such a scary manner. I thought you’d started to hate me.”

With a chuckle, Lord Simeon replied, “If I hadn’t gone that far, would you have listened? There are times when you have such momentum that it can be

difficult to hold back. I'm convinced that if I'd been more moderate, I wouldn't have been able to stop you. In order to cool your head quickly and make you return to work, I had no choice but to be severe."

I pouted just a little. "Am I truly that unreasonable?"

He put an arm around my shoulders. I clung entreatingly to the large body of the man I'd cherished for such a long time now, and he lovingly embraced me in return, soothing me. "I know that you'll always listen if I explain properly. However, in that moment, there wasn't time for a long discussion. I admit that I was a little too unkind, but I thought that once you'd gathered your thoughts and reflected on it, you'd understand."

He kept emphasizing that I *was* able to understand, that I *could* listen and be reasonable. It occurred to me that this was the most important part. Other people wouldn't bother telling me what I'd done wrong. It was easier just to allow it and let it pass. That wasn't so much tolerance as pure indifference. In a world where no one else demanded anything of me, and simply assumed I wouldn't care to learn, Lord Simeon alone went to the trouble of pointing out the little things. That was an acknowledgment on his part that this was worth it—that I was worth the effort.

He didn't hate me at all. In fact, he cared about me and respected me more than anyone else.

"I'm sorry."

I felt bad that I'd doubted his love even for a moment. After I apologized, he delivered another kiss, this time a soft peck on my lips. He smiled at me from so close that our noses and glasses touched.

"I will say, I'm quite sure that if anyone else had heard, they'd have laughed at me for being so stuffy. Still, by the end of all this, I don't want you to be deemed incapable and unworthy of esteem. You are neither arrogant nor foolish, and I want others to acknowledge that. I wanted you to behave in a way that would make them see. Perhaps I was being selfish."

I quickly shook my head. "Not at all." There couldn't be many people who would say a thing like that. Lord Simeon's sternness was always underpinned by affection and compassion. That was why all his subordinates adored him, and I

shouldn't have forgotten it either.

"Flying free is your nature, of course. As long as it's not dangerous, I want you to be able to do whatever you like. However, especially in light of the situation that developed today, you need a particular kind of awareness and to behave appropriately. You understand that, don't you?"

"I do."

"During working hours, please take your duties seriously. Even when you see me, keep in mind that this is our workplace and we're both on the job, so we should avoid any personal interactions. Just because we're married doesn't mean we should act as though we have special privileges."

"Understood."

"Trust and a good reputation are not easy to earn, and being in a respected position isn't enough for them to be handed to you on a plate. However, it's far from a waste of time. One day, those will be assets you can rely on. Think of this as a step toward that."

"All right."

I responded with a nod to each of his points, and then he nodded as well, appearing rather satisfied. *I suppose I have a shining example right in front of me. His actions over the years have earned him a great deal of respect, so I should try to follow in his footsteps. As his wife, I can't be an embarrassment to him. Measuring up in this regard is far more important than the fact that we're mismatched in terms of looks.*

Lord Simeon removed his glasses and then smoothly took mine off. While still supporting me firmly with an arm around my back, he began to push me down onto the bed. His lips came toward mine again, surely about to descend on me very passionately this time. The sensation I yearned for was so close at hand, but with some effort, I pulled my mind back into the realm of reason.

"Wait. Please."

I raised my hand and put it in the way. *Goodness, he not only took a bath before coming, but shaved as well.* Although his face tended to be slightly prickly at night, the sensation that met my hand now was silky smooth. *Maybe*

he was more nervous about coming here than he appeared.

His gaze spoke of deep dissatisfaction. I was sorry to be ruining the moment when we'd both so longed for it, but I couldn't give in. Not yet.

"When you arrived, I was about to go to Julianne's room. I don't know if she's been made to sleep in the same room as Nadia, but if so, that would surely be unbearable. I was thinking about bringing her here, if possible."

Lord Simeon heaved a heavy sigh and sat up.

"Is that overstepping my bounds as well?" I asked.

"No, but I've already had Julianne moved to another room. You needn't worry about it."

"Oh, I see." So she wouldn't have to face Nadia tonight. That was reassuring, but it still wasn't enough. "Even so, I'd like to go and see how she's doing. What room is she in?"

"I understand the impulse, but I can't allow you to see her right now. She's confined to her room under guard." To my surprise, the stern tone returned, as though the sweet atmosphere from moments ago had been a mirage.

I started to tremble. "What? But...why? Julianne didn't do anything wrong. Did you examine the tea? Was there really something in it?"

"Calm down a moment, please. I'll explain everything."

He slipped past me, stood up from the bed and started untying his military boots. *It occurs to me that he was about to get into bed in his uniform. Is that really not a problem? Admittedly, I'm sure he'd have ended up stripping it off one way or another... Ahem.*

"What happened, then? Tell me."

"To start with the most crucial detail, Nadia's accusation wasn't entirely fabricated. Arsenic was detected in the tea."

"Arsenic?"

The name alone was bone-chilling. This substance was so famous that it was practically synonymous with poisoning. *And that was in the tea? I can't believe*

it. It wasn't Julianne, I know it. She of all people would never do such a thing!

"Why? How? What did Julianne say? Surely she didn't know anything about it."

"Again, if you'll calm down, I can tell you. Everything's all right."

He lightly clapped me on the shoulder and climbed onto the bed again. Sitting with his legs stretched out, he lifted me onto his lap, where he gently embraced me and stroked my head and back over and over.

"Miss Julianne's statement is that she made the tea normally. Nadia came in after that and started hounding her, asking her what she'd put in it, and then, before she knew it, Nadia took the pot from her hands and started all the commotion we saw."

His words made me pat my chest in relief. *Of course that's what happened. There's no way she would try to poison anyone.* "I'm glad that's what she said in the end, but I wish she'd said it at the time. Why did she stay silent when accusations were flying?"

"She was being prudent. If there really was a harmful substance in the tea, she didn't want to carelessly deny that before knowing for sure. If anyone had drunk any, there would have been no going back. Also, His Highness was there, and so were you, of course. If she'd stated that she hadn't done anything, both of you would surely have stood up for her. She didn't want that, however, so she remained quiet instead. This was the correct choice. Her reasoned caution meant the worst possible outcome was avoided."

Ah, I see! It made sense to me now, and I felt a sense of pride. *Prudent to the end—that's the Julianne I know.*

This was no doubt the reason she hadn't looked at His Highness even once. If she'd turned to him with anxiety in her eyes, he would have been compelled to come to her defense. However, that could have led to tragedy. He might have drunk the tea to try and prove it was safe. Even if he hadn't, he would have added an element of bias to the proceedings that would have made it impossible to investigate impartially. She hadn't wanted His Highness to put himself in such a situation, so she had stayed silent, despite knowing that heavy suspicion would be cast upon her.

You see, Your Majesty? That's how incredible she is. When faced with a terrible accusation, the normal response would be to fervently deny it, but she didn't succumb to that. It takes a special kind of person to stay levelheaded and make a split-second decision.

This was exactly what I'd wanted the queen to learn about her.

"Why is she still confined to her room, then? Is Julianne still a suspect?"

"Think about it objectively. So far, all we have is her own story, with no corroborating witness statements. I don't believe she's lying, but we can't prove her innocence with feelings alone. We need firm evidence."

"Yes, I see what you mean."

He was right. What kind of evidence could there be, though? If anyone else had been there we could have asked them to comment on it, but Julianne had been alone in the kitchenette. The only other eyewitness was Nadia, who had accused her in the first place.

This did raise another point. "Julianne shouldn't be the only suspect," I noted. "Based on what we know, Nadia's a possible culprit as well. Let's assume for a moment that Julianne didn't do anything out of the ordinary. That would mean she also can't have done anything that *looked* like she was putting arsenic in the tea. Sugar is added afterward, to the drinker's taste, so all that she added to the teapot should be leaves and hot water. There'd be nothing to cause any misunderstanding, so isn't it strange that Nadia would immediately react like that as soon as she saw Julianne in the kitchenette?"

If there was no way to clear a false charge, the only alternative was finding the real criminal. I didn't want to start throwing accusations around indiscriminately, but there was no denying that Nadia was a plausible candidate.

Lord Simeon agreed without any resistance. The same thought had clearly occurred to him, too. "Yes, Nadia is also a suspect. It's entirely plausible that when she picked up the teapot and carried it over to me, she added some poison that she was hiding. That's a reasonable explanation. However, at present it's also purely speculative. Until some evidence is found, we can't come to a judgment. The other possibility is that the culprit is an entirely

separate third party.”

So we need more evidence for this as well. I suppose that much was obvious.

“If Nadia did do it, I wonder what her motive would be. Have you found out anything unusual about her?”

“We’re still investigating. We haven’t reached that stage yet.”

He explained that they had prioritized testing the teapot for poison, scouring the kitchenette for clues, and getting statements from the two women. Since the detailed investigation would begin tomorrow, I decided to mention something that had been bothering me.

“On the first night after Julianne and I came to the palace, I went to her room to see how she was doing, and I met Nadia and their two other roommates. Everyone seemed to be getting along well and having a friendly chat. I didn’t particularly sense any friction.”

“Hmm?”

“And yet, when I met her again in the princess’s chambers, Nadia seemed oddly standoffish. Initially I thought it was because she was working, but there was definitely some unpleasantness in her attitude toward Julianne. It stood out rather a lot.”

“Are you suggesting they had a falling out?”

“I don’t know. Julianne didn’t answer me, she just said not to worry. However, this was shortly before the queen arrived, so we couldn’t talk for long. My suspicion was less that they might have fallen out, and more that Nadia could have been frustrated when she learned about Julianne’s circumstances. I’ve heard she’s an excellent housemaid who takes her work very seriously, so it’s possible she thought Julianne was here to amuse herself and nothing more. It’s hard to imagine that she’d go so far due to that alone, but could you ask them about it and find out some more specific information?”

He nodded at my request. “Yes, indeed. I fully intend to dig into the relationship between the two of them. Between women, even trivial matters can lead to terrible discord.”

“It’s exactly the same with men. Aside from that, I would *really* like to be there for Julianne’s questioning.”

This was met with a firm shake of the head. I’d expected this, but I doggedly persisted.

“I won’t get in the way, and of course I’ll be sure to get permission from Her Majesty. I just don’t want to leave her alone among all the frightening military officers. She’ll shrivel up into a little ball. If I was there, I could calm her down and make her more comfortable talking.”

“I’ll take great care to ensure she’s not scared. Miss Julianne knows me, so I’m sure she’ll be able to talk to me.”

“You’re the scariest one of all.”

“No need to be rude. You talk as though I go around terrorizing helpless young ladies. Besides, I thought she shared your tendencies.”

“Not exactly. I’m sure she’d enjoy *watching* someone be questioned by a dashing handsome man, but she doesn’t have the propensity to enjoy being interrogated herself.”

“I feel I’m learning more and more about your own strange predilections. Anyway, I’m afraid it’s not possible.”

Although I tried to insist further, Lord Simeon rejected my efforts with a stony face. When I pouted sullenly, he came at me lightning-fast, his lips covering mine. As he repeatedly kissed me, he lowered me off his lap and moved to push me down onto the bed again.

Though my will was quickly being eroded, I held out and raised an objection. “Wait, please. Now’s...not the...”

“I’ll lead the investigation with every ounce of care I can muster. Can’t you trust me?”

“That’s not my concern. I just... Wait, I...”

My breathing grew heavy.

“I’ll treat Julianne with kindness. For the time being I do have to treat her as a suspect, but the guards are for her own protection as well. I swear to you that

you have no reason to worry, but please, can't you stop resisting and let us enjoy our night the way newlyweds do? You're not the only one who's had to endure days of loneliness."

I moaned softly. "It...didn't show on your face. Honestly, I... I..." A groan escaped my lips.

"If you're too loud, they'll hear you outside."

Chuckling tormentingly, my husband melted my defenses too thoroughly for me to resist any longer. As apologetic as I felt toward Julianne and His Highness, his warmth made me deeply happy, and we enjoyed a night of the joyous kind I hadn't experienced for too long.

Chapter Eleven

The following morning, I saw my husband off at an early hour to ensure that no one saw him, and then, as promised, I dedicated myself to my work.

Borrowing a desk in a corner of the queen's chambers, I translated an official letter to be sent to a neighboring country. Her Majesty knew several foreign languages herself, of course, but Lindenese wasn't her forte, so she normally had the relevant government official translate for her. On this occasion, I'd happened to be there when she was talking about it, so I'd mentioned that I could speak Lindenese and had been asked to take care of it.

It was far more important than any of the work I'd done until now. *Hopefully it will come in handy to some extent, at least. The official will look it over before it's sent, so I do have a slight worry that I'm only increasing his workload.*

The others seemed far busier. Giselle, Noella, and Babette were rushing about on various errands, taking it in turns to see who would handle each one. Yvonne, meanwhile, was helping the queen to draft her speech for the Foundation Day ceremony. As an attendee at such events, I'd never thought much about the royal family's addresses, but it turned out they had to consider all sorts of tiny details and choose their words very carefully. Delivering a rousing speech wasn't just a matter of natural talent.

"Would this do?" said the queen. "I must say, I still have doubts. Nothing quite seems right with this portion."

"Are you sure it's not all right as it is? I feel it gets the point across rather well."

"Part of me wonders if we should express it a tiny bit more directly."

"Perhaps. Personally, I don't think there's anything wrong with the current draft. If you shave off too much, it'll feel overly terse and unexpressive."

"Yes, I suppose so."

They continued to debate back and forth, and I reached the end of my task

before they did. Writing happened to be my own specialty, and while translating I had taken the liberty of adjusting a few of the more inelegant phrases. *Was I overstepping my bounds in doing that? I suppose if it's a problem, the official will point it out.*

I put down my pen to wait for the ink to dry. With less than a month to go until Foundation Day, there was a palpable air of restlessness in the palace. A lot of people were visiting the queen's chambers with questions and concerns. I was sure they'd also be making very thorough plans about the royal guard assignments on the day. The incident with Julianne and Nadia had only increased the relevant workload.

My mind turned back to yesterday's incident. *Who put the arsenic in the tea? If it wasn't Julianne or Nadia, and if no other poison or suspicious substance has been found, does that mean the pot itself was contaminated? That would fit with what we've been told. Wait, no it wouldn't. Nadia insists that Julianne added it after making the tea—that she saw it with her own eyes.*

I didn't have any proof to base this on, but I strongly suspected she'd said that in order to frame Julianne. What was the reason, though? What was her real goal? She couldn't have been meaning to harm any of the royals, or she wouldn't have warned them herself. And yet, using real poison just to frame Julianne felt far too extreme.

It's not completely impossible, but I'm sure it's not the real explanation. Who was meant to fall victim to the poison? No one, perhaps. How could she have been trying to murder anyone if she intentionally stopped them all from drinking it?

This was all highly vexing. The more I thought about it, the less sense it made. I felt as though I only needed one more clue and I'd be able to figure it out. Was there really nothing else? No other detail I'd overlooked?

"Are you finished?"

I was so lost in thought that I didn't register the queen's voice straight away. When I realized she'd spoken to me, I hurriedly stood up. "Yes! My apologies."

Dear oh dear, I must pay more attention. With both the original and my translation in hand, I walked over to the queen's desk.

She took the pages and gave my text a cursory glance, then put her signature at the bottom and put it in the out tray, ready to be passed on to the official in charge.

With a half-smile, she said, "I suppose you must be rather concerned about Miss Julianne."

I ducked my head. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to be distracted during work."

"You completed the task, so it's quite all right. Besides, it's only natural for you to worry."

Once again, I wasn't chided all. *I suppose her view of me is unlikely to change overnight.*

"Do you still believe in Miss Julianne's innocence?" she asked.

"Yes. Regardless of my own opinion, she doesn't have a motive."

The queen had received a full report, so she already knew the details, including that arsenic had been found in the tea.

"There are some who say it might be revenge for how she's been treated here."

"I understand why they'd think that, but those are the views of people who don't know her. Julianne wasn't at all bothered by being made to do domestic work, so there's no reason she'd seek revenge."

"Interesting."

I could tell that the queen wasn't convinced that Julianne was the culprit, but neither did she have any sentimental attachment to her innocence. She was impartial to the last, content to watch events unfold from an outside perspective.

When Nadia, with her six-year record of good service, was pitted against Julianne, who had only just arrived, it was hardly surprising that the former would be trusted over the latter. Julianne's parents had also made such a bad impression that I wouldn't blame anyone for assuming she was a ne'er-do-well.

With my thoughts all a muddle, I couldn't meet the queen's piercing gaze. I lowered my eyes and looked at her hands instead.

The page she was working on was held down by a paperweight in the shape of a puppy. *Is the queen fond of dogs as well? It looks unusually cutesy for her tastes. Perhaps it was a present.*

“Who *would* you say is the culprit, then? That other housemaid, Nadia?”

Carefully, I replied, “I have a great many thoughts on the matter, but it feels unwise to share them at this moment, as there’s no firm basis on which to draw conclusions. Please forgive me.”

“Goodness, how overcautious. Still, what else should I expect from the wife of Lieutenant Colonel Flaubert?”

She shifted her gaze to Yvonne and the two exchanged a giggle. They were teasing me, and it left me rather embarrassed.

“Shall... Shall we close the window? The wind is awfully strong today.”

Clumsily changing the subject, I stepped over to the nearest window. This wasn’t a lie; even under the paperweight, the queen’s pages were fluttering in the wind. *Whoever designed that paperweight is a master craftsman. It looks just like the little puppy is playfully holding onto the paper. How lovely! I want one too.*

“Thank you,” said Her Majesty. “If you like, you may take a break. If you’re concerned about your friend, you could go and visit the lieutenant colonel.”

“That’s very kind of you, but he’d only turn me away. He’d tell me I’m poking my nose in where it doesn’t belong.”

“My word,” said Her Majesty.

“Lieutenant Colonel Flaubert certainly is cruel to his wife,” remarked Yvonne.

The pair laughed even more uproariously.

“And I thought he was so protective of you,” Yvonne added. “His menacing demeanor the other night was rather a shock, in fact. When he played the violin, as well, it seemed as though he only gave in because his wife pleaded with her eyes.”

“The crown prince also mentioned that the lieutenant colonel was head over heels for you. That’s why I gave up on the idea of splitting you apart.”

“I’ve also heard stories of a subject having their wife or lover stolen by their master, only for the master to find their life unceremoniously cut short.”

“I can hardly believe that hardheaded man has fallen so madly in love, though. Even as a boy, he focused entirely on his studies and his military arts. He never showed the slightest interest in the opposite sex. You must be quite special indeed, Marielle!”

This teasing from these older ladies made me too embarrassed to bear. In an excessively nervous tone, I blurted, “That paperweight! It’s simply adorable. Was it a present from someone?”

My second attempt at changing the subject only made them laugh more. However, eventually the queen took on a look that said she was willing to have mercy on me. “It was indeed. This was a long time ago now, but it was given to me by His Majesty.”

“Really? It was from the king?”

“Yes, when I was still in my teenage years.”

She cast a brief, affectionate glance at the paperweight. The sweet reminiscence was visible in her eyes.

When I imagined the two of them in their younger days, my heart began to race. *To woo the queen, still an innocent young lady, the then-prince gave her that as a gift. He’d chosen something cute, thinking it was the sort of thing a girl would like, but really it wasn’t to her taste at all. The memory is a touch bittersweet, but she still treasures that moment even now. Goodness, I’m fangirling!*

Presents from the one you love are always a source of joy. It was a feeling I understood very well indeed. Once upon a time, Lord Simeon had sent me roses in imitation of one of my novels. That was an unforgettable memory for me, as were the sweets he’d once bought me as an apology, and the hat he’d purchased after noticing that I’d taken a liking to it. All of them made me happy to think about.

It’s just like the way Princess Henriette talked about her dog, Pearl. She was a present from Prince Liberto. Past or present, women in love always feel—

Wait. Hold on.

“Marielle?”

When I fell silent, the queen looked at me with some puzzlement. I had to reply, but I just couldn't focus my attention on her for the moment. Something had flashed into my mind and I had to catch it. I devoted all of my attention to not letting it slip away.

Is it possible? If I'm right, then this could be the key to everything.

“What's the matter?”

After a moment, I looked back at her. This time I didn't avoid meeting her eyes as I had until now. Looking at her undaunted, I said, “Your Majesty, I'm terribly sorry, but would mind if I take my leave for now?”

She met my gaze straight on and raised her eyebrows. “Are you going to see the lieutenant colonel?”

“No. There's something I'd like to make sure of.”

I *would* have to contact Lord Simeon, however. Princess Henriette, too. If the reality was as I suspected, there was no time to waste. It would have to be investigated urgently.

The queen stared at me with searching eyes for a few moments, but she ultimately didn't ask for any details. Her expression softened and she nodded. “Very well. You appear to have come to some important realization. I give you my permission to go.”

“Thank you most kindly. My apologies for abandoning my post.”

Before leaving, I picked up the pen on her desk.

“Incidentally, I realize this is thoroughly impertinent of me, but I have a suggestion for how you might adjust that difficult passage.”

I feverishly scrawled the words across a blank space on the page, then dropped the pen and offered a curtsy. As they stared at me, dumbfounded, I turned and rushed out of the room.

After that I ran about all over the place, contacting relevant parties and

gathering information at a breakneck pace. Then, when it was time for afternoon tea, I visited Princess Henriette's chambers.

She greeted me with a broad smile. "Come in. You've arrived at exactly the right moment. Severin and Simeon just got here as well."

I stepped into the room. "Thank you for having me."

My husband and His Highness were there, as she said, but this time I faced no scolding about shirking my duties. In fact, Lord Simeon's expression was almost impossibly kind.

"Impossible" is the word, certainly. If this hadn't been prearranged, I'm certain he'd have a scowl on his face.

The sitting room looked just as it had the day before. Lord Simeon had come as an escort for His Highness and was sitting beside him. This time, Pearl ran out of the bedroom and scampered about at everyone's feet. When she charged toward me, I crouched and said hello to her as well.

"Good afternoon, Pearl!"

When I stroked her little head, she wagged her tail even harder and leapt up at me. With her forelegs on my lap again, she stretched and tried to lick my face.

"No, you mustn't lick me! I have makeup on!" I raised my head so she couldn't reach any higher than my chin, and she licked me there. "Hah! That tickles!"

I began to laugh my head off. As I tried to restrain the dog with my arms, His Highness rebuked Lord Simeon. "Your rival, in this case, is a pint-sized puppy. No need for the murderous glare."

Lord Simeon turned his head away with a look of displeasure.

I explained, "When a dog licks your face, it's a sign of flattery. Puppies do it to adult dogs, and the lower-ranking members of the pack lick the higher-ranking ones when they greet them. So, if I turn the tables and go to lick *Pearl's* face... See?"

She turned tail and tried to run off.

“Stop that at once. It’s unsanitary.”

“I wasn’t actually going to do it.” I picked her up and rubbed my cheek against her instead. “Aren’t you a cute little doggy? Yes you are! Oh yes you are!”

Alas, this only added to my husband’s ill humor.

Princess Henriette laughed. “Don’t be jealous. Pearl’s a girl, anyway.”

“Perhaps Prince Liberto did that on purpose,” said His Highness. “He might be the jealous sort as well.”

“Hmm, I wonder if that *was* the reason,” his sister replied.

I put Pearl down and sat next to my husband. One of the ladies-in-waiting gave me a cloth to wipe my hands and face. In the princess’s chambers, such things were presumably always available. Looking around, there were dog toys lying on the floor, and a cushion laid out that looked like a very comfortable place for her to sleep. All in all, a lot of attention was paid to the dog’s needs. Pearl was a little princess herself, always in high spirits when visitors came, and everyone looked at her with great affection.

Only one person, Nadia, deliberately kept her distance and watched Pearl with cold and wary eyes. Unlike Julianne, Nadia had not been confined under guard, but had simply returned to work. Now that all the guests had arrived, she went into the kitchenette to prepare the tea.

His Highness and Lord Simeon paid no attention to her. With faces that betrayed no particular concern, they chattered idly...or so they made it appear.

Officially, the reason for this little gathering was for a report to be delivered about how events had proceeded over the past day.

“Have you spoken to Julianne at all?” I asked His Highness.

“No, I’m leaving the investigation in Simeon’s capable hands.”

Not a shred of yesterday’s anguish and uncertainty remained on his face. He was perfectly self-possessed—a man who thought it a shame that this has happened, but was able to watch with the neutral eyes of an observer.

It was a flawless performance.

“I mustn’t allow my personal feelings to get in the way. The truth is crystal clear regardless. I can hardly come to her defense, sad as that may be.”

When he chose to, His Highness could project an air of confident composure. After all, he was the brutal, blackhearted military officer’s master. Even though he wasn’t happy about Julianne being placed under guard, he hadn’t betrayed this by secretly going to visit her and offer his support. He was playing the role of the levelheaded, perhaps even cruelhearted prince who could easily discard the woman he’d wished to marry.

“I still find it hard to believe that Julianne would do such a thing,” I commented.

“Rather a shocker for me as well. The fact remains, however, that arsenic was found in the tea Julianne made for us. She didn’t even offer a clear denial. I suppose she really did find her treatment here a tad too rotten. Still, poison? Very unwise indeed. I thought she was more sensible than that. It seems I’m a terrible judge of character.”

It really was magnificent. I was so convinced that I started to feel offended despite knowing it was all an act. *Men like this really do exist, though, don’t they? Is this the kind of skill he brings to his political and diplomatic work?*

Now the stage had been set. It was simply a case of waiting.

Nadia returned pushing the tea cart. However, before serving us, she said, “Apologies, but could I ask you all to wait a moment?”

Then she poured a small trickle of tea into a cup and lifted it up to her own mouth. Although the tea was meant for her mistress and the guests, she drank it first. After that, she showed the now empty cup to all of us. The traces of brown at the bottom let us know that there had indeed been tea inside the cup.

“As you can see, it’s perfectly safe to drink. I realize my behavior is unorthodox, but I hope it provides some reassurance.”

Tacitly acknowledging that she, too, was under suspicion, she had taken it upon herself to test the tea for poison before serving it. After putting down the used cup, she poured the tea for us, laying a silver spoon neatly on each saucer.

As Nadia stared intently, we each picked up our cups and started drinking.

Visible relief washed over her face. If she was no longer trusted, she wouldn't have been asked to serve tea in the first place, but even so, her nerves were no great surprise. As soon as we'd accepted the tea without complaint, the difference in her mood was palpable.

Now Pearl ran into the kitchenette through the door Nadia had left open. For dogs and cats, a door that was always closed held a special appeal. It represented a place they could never enter, so the moment they could, they seized the opportunity at once. For a pet owner, accidentally shutting them in after not noticing them dashing into a forbidden space was an everyday occurrence.

Though Nadia should have been the one to take care of this, she did not move a muscle. Instead, I stood and followed after the dog.

Walking into the narrow room used only for making tea, I was reminded again of just how perfectly clean and tidy it was. Anywhere that food was handled should have been cleaned to a high standard, but Nadia's work truly went the extra mile, reaching into every nook and cranny. It fit with what I'd heard yesterday about her being methodical and meticulous.

Pearl followed her nose into a corner of the room.

"No! Bad girl!"

I hurriedly picked up the small animal before she could move too far. She'd been trained to only eat the food she was offered, but that didn't mean it was safe to let my guard down. She operated on instinct, after all. Holding her in my arms, I looked to see what she'd caught the scent of. On the floor was a tiny lump of food, cheese if I wasn't mistaken, about the size of a fingernail.

Footsteps behind me signaled Lord Simeon's arrival. With my gaze, I directed him toward the cheese. He didn't touch it directly even though he wore gloves, but rather took a dishcloth from the counter above and used that to pick it up.

When he stood, we silently exchanged nods, then left the kitchenette. Upon our return to the sitting room, all eyes focused on us. The congenial atmosphere had vanished, replaced by a distinct tension in the air. Stern looks abounded, but there was no nervous anger, only levelheaded reserve.

Only one person, Nadia, looked warily at us, the color beginning to drain from her face.

Lord Simeon's voice echoed commandingly. "Nadia Leurquin, you're under arrest."

"What? But... I..." For a moment, Nadia was lost for words. Then she shook her head violently. "Arrest me? For what? I didn't do a thing!"

"The exact crime you're guilty of may be tough to pin down, but what's certain is that it's too heinous to be punished by a warning alone. Your actions would have led to an execution. I'm sure you're aware that even *attempted* murder of a member of the royal family warrants the death penalty."

"This is a ridiculous accusation!" she cried. "Julianne was the one who put the poison in the tea! I stopped her from serving it! Didn't I prove to you mere moments ago that the tea I served today was harmless?"

His Highness gave a signal to a lady-in-waiting, who opened the door leading to the corridor. A knight entered.

Beginning to tremble violently, Nadia drew back all the way to the wall. She fervently shook her head. "It wasn't me! You can't prove anything! Please, if you're saying I did it, show me some proof!"

The ladies-in-waiting looked at Lord Simeon uneasily as well. They had cooperated with our plan, but they hadn't yet received a detailed explanation, so they remained unconvinced that Nadia was the culprit. She was a housemaid with a proven track record of hard work, so she had earned their trust.

However, that trust would not last forever.

Lord Simeon put the cheese, and the cloth surrounding it, on the table in front of His Highness. "It won't take long to make sure, but this is almost certainly laced with arsenic."

"Where was it?" asked His Highness.

"In a corner of the floor. A human wouldn't notice it straight away, but the dog was drawn to the scent."

"It looks like a poisoned morsel of food you might use for a rat trap."

“Yes, it’s very much in that vein. However, this wasn’t meant to be eaten by a rat, but by a dog.”

Those last words made Nadia turn ghostly pale.

I softly stroked the dog in my arms. The poison hadn’t been for the royal family at all. Her intended victim wasn’t a person, but a dog. Nadia had wanted to kill this good little girl.

“When we spoke to other members of the palace staff who knew Nadia Leurquin, there was one common factor that emerged other than her work ethic and her background. They frequently mentioned her unusually strong dislike of animals.”

Nadia was unable to form words. As she shook violently, her face white as a sheet, she opened her mouth as if to persist in denial, but all she could do was gasp and whimper.

Even Pearl, who had been in such high spirits, sensed the discord in the air and grew restless, darting her head around to look at everyone. I went over to Princess Henriette and handed the dog to her.

“Nadia has a visceral dislike of all animals,” Lord Simeon continued. “She mentioned it rather often, apparently.”

“I see,” His Highness replied.

“She’s been known to frankly express her hatred even of creatures universally lauded as sweet and charming, such as kittens and squirrels. It seems to stem from her fastidious love of cleanliness. She sees animals as offensively unclean.”

The immaculate kitchenette served as the perfect example. For a housemaid, cleanliness was a desirable trait, of course. Even her hatred of animals wasn’t *inherently* a problem. It only became a problem when she had to serve a mistress who had a dog.

Lord Simeon turned to face her again. “You couldn’t stand having to deal with a dog as part of your duties. You might have been able to cope with one confined to a cage, but she’s allowed to run around freely, and you were even asked to handle her directly. You were forced to touch a creature you found disgusting even to look at, and even clean up her mess. It must have been truly

abhorrent.”

When she had been told to take Pearl into the next room, even that short time spent carrying the dog had caused Nadia a great deal of displeasure. She’d even asked for her apron to be immediately put into the laundry because there was dog hair sticking to it.

“You decided you couldn’t allow this to continue, so you thought you’d eliminate the dog. Arsenic is widely used as a rat poison, so you used the same technique to make poisoned food and trick the dog into eating it. Of course, you needed a way to avoid taking the blame. Even if it was dismissed as a mere accident, if it happened on your watch, you’d be accused of negligence. Thus, you tried to make it look like someone else’s doing. The scenario you concocted was that Miss Julianne brought the poison here, then it happened to find its way into the dog’s mouth. Isn’t that right?”

When I’d realized her true goal, I’d also realized there was no time to lose. Nadia was sure to act now, or she’d forever lose her chance to kill Pearl while making it look like it was Julianne’s fault. Today, and only today, it was still possible to claim that the poison had been dropped by Julianne and left on the floor. If she’d waited, her entire plan would have fallen apart.

And, just as I had expected, she had made the attempt.

Cowering in fear, Nadia continued to shake her head, reluctant to admit the truth. His Highness glared at her harshly for a moment, but then averted his eyes and looked down at his hands. No doubt he felt anger toward the one who had tried to frame his beloved. However, I knew him well enough to know that he’d started to think about Nadia’s feelings as well.

In a detached tone, Lord Simeon pressed her further. “Given your intense dislike of animals, you wouldn’t normally be so careless as to let a dog into the kitchenette. You knew that Pearl was here, so you’d never casually throw the door open and leave it that way by accident. You opened it on purpose, intending her to go in. It was a purposeful move to make her eat the poisoned cheese.”

“No!” she shrieked. “No, you’re wrong! You’re making it all up! Where’s your evidence? Who saw me put that on the floor? Julianne could have put it there

to kill rats! That's far more plausible!"

Turning to me, Lord Simeon said, "Marielle?"

I nodded and began. "Julianne might not love animals as much as I do, but she's still very fond of them. House Sorel used to have a dog, although it's long since passed away. Any house that raises cats and dogs steers clear from using poison as a pest control measure. She knows the danger full well, so she'd never have used poison in the kitchenette."

Even though Pearl was meant to be kept out of the kitchenette, that didn't make it safe to use rat poison. Animals—and small children, for that matter—will get into any and every corner as soon as you leave them unattended. Every pet owner has the experience of their pet opening a door that wasn't closed tightly enough and getting into a forbidden room.

I had clear memories of Julianne's mother screaming when a rat appeared in their home. It was inevitable that this would happen once in a while, since they didn't ever use poison. Similarly, when I was moving my cat to the Flaubert manor, the first thing I asked about was their approach to pest control. After years of experience raising a dog and caring for her younger brother, Julianne would never have felt comfortable using rat poison here.

"Precisely," said Lord Simeon after my explanation concluded. "In addition, we conducted a thorough search of the kitchenette yesterday and removed anything that looked even remotely suspicious. Do you honestly think we'd have overlooked something like this? We're not perfect, certainly. Some of our members have more attention to detail than others. However, in a room as clean as that, not a single knight would be blockheaded enough to overlook the only crumb of food left littering the floor. We'd have found it and investigated it as a suspicious substance. Furthermore, after permission was given to use the kitchenette again, no one entered it but you. You'd never have left it there unless you meant to."

Nadia's plan was exposed by her own scrupulous fussiness. If she wanted it to look like the cheese had been overlooked, she should have left more crumbs on the floor. But she couldn't bear to, so, alone, this small lump stood out too much.

Her back still against the wall, Nadia sank to the ground, devoid of all energy. Words failed her.

Princess Henriette heaved a very sad sigh indeed and was about to make a comment. To keep the princess from being forced to say anything too painful, I interjected first. “Why didn’t you say something before resorting to this? If you’d mentioned that you didn’t like animals, some arrangements would surely have been made. Everyone understands that pets aren’t everyone’s cup of tea. Princess Henriette isn’t the type of person to ignore your feelings, nor are Sophie and the other ladies-in-waiting. You can tell just by looking at them that they’re not completely heartless.”

When Nadia turned to me, her previous cowering gave way to a horrifying scowl. It was as if, purely because I was the one who had asked this, she saw me as the cause of all her woes, and she unleashed her fury on me.

“How *dare* you!” she yelled. “What would *you* know? You make it sound so easy!” By now, she had forgone all efforts to insist upon her innocence. “If I’d complained, I’d have been moved somewhere else in the palace. Then what? I’d never have the chance to work for the princess ever again! I spent *years* toiling away, doing grunt work, hoping to *finally* be promoted one day. Now I have to be driven out by a *dog*!? I thought my luck had come in at last, and now *this*! Why does it have to be me? Why do I have to give up my place and lose everything I’ve worked for!?”

Touches of empathy appeared on the faces of the ladies-in-waiting. They had some understanding of Nadia’s feelings, I was sure. It was impossible to conceive of Pearl being put in a cage or kept far away from Nadia just because she didn’t like dogs. This was Princess Henriette’s home, so of course she would let her pet run free if she wanted to. If Nadia couldn’t bear that, the only option was to be transferred, which would no doubt be intensely grating to a housemaid who had worked to craft an excellent reputation and slowly climb the ladder.

Her frustration did make sense to me. Some people disliked animals, hated them even, and there was nothing wrong with that as such. In a world where children and animals are always treated as impossibly sweet and lovely, being the odd one out who *doesn’t* like them must always be a struggle. It must feel

as though they're being constantly forced upon you. Nadia had probably suffered more than her fair share of harsh words on the matter, being deemed cold, unfeeling. Now, she had spent years doing a meticulous job, and everyone acknowledged the excellence of her skills, all for it to be ruined by the presence of one single dog. That had to have been unimaginably vexing.

I understood her feelings—and yet, her actions were still unforgivable.

“Is that why you tried to frame Julianne? To preserve your own innocence, you wanted her to appear guilty of a terrible crime, even though she had done nothing wrong?”

Nadia bit her lip so hard that a red trickle began to flow.

“I hate her!” she confessed. “I tried to befriend her at first. Our backgrounds were so similar—or so I thought. Then it turned out that the crown prince had fallen in love with her. She was only *pretending* to be a housemaid so she could come here and meet the queen. Such codswallop! What gives *her* the right? What makes *her* so special? Ugh!”

Tears began to stream from Nadia's eyes.

“I come from a barony as well. By all rights, I should never have been a housemaid. I was bullied and pushed out by my stepmother. I never even had a chance to make my debut in society. No, I've been forced to work as a housemaid ever since I was a child. Apparently Julianne's family isn't even particularly wealthy! So...why!? What does she have that makes her deserve all this!?”

It turned out that it wasn't even Julianne's work ethic that Nadia hated, but her very reason for being there. *Even a skilled housemaid with an impeccable record can suffer from jealousy, I suppose.*

His Highness, who had stayed silent throughout this last exchange, stood up with a sigh. He slowly walked over to Nadia and faced her.

“I had heard about that unfortunate business in your past. There's also scope for sympathy when it comes to being forced to work with a furry little creature. You've suffered, I'll grant you. Even so, this cannot be forgiven. Trying to murder the dog purely because you hated it is simply too self-centered for

words. Using your dissatisfaction with your own lot as an excuse to falsely accuse another person, and make them suffer the wrath of your anger, can only be called malicious. Your own pain is a separate matter from the weight of the crime you've committed. The crime itself cannot be overlooked."

As he calmly expressed his thoughts, Nadia lost all her ferocity. Now only the tears remained. Sobbing, she was pulled to her feet by the knight, who saluted His Highness and Lord Simeon, ready to take her away.

At that point, Princess Henriette stood and called out, "Wait!" Then she lowered her head. "Nadia, there is one thing I'd like to apologize for. I had noticed your aversion to Pearl, but I thought nothing of it—that perhaps you weren't used to handling dogs, and that you'd be all right after a while. I'm so sorry. I'd forgotten that there are people who can't stand to be around them no matter what. I should have been more considerate."

Unable to answer, Nadia simply looked at the floor. All words had failed her now. Still crying, she let the guard lead her out of the room.

Quiet fell over the room, only interrupted by a sigh. Princess Henriette turned to His Highness, bowing her head to him as well.

"It's my fault that you and your beloved were placed in such danger. Nadia's behavior may be unforgivable, but my own consideration was also woefully lacking. I can only beg your forgiveness. Please allow me to express my deepest apologies."

This came across less as a sisterly apology and more as one delivered by a subject to the prince. In a moment of crisis like this, she didn't hide behind the bonds of family, but was prepared to take all the responsibility expected of a public figure. There was something very honorable about her approach.

With a cheerful expression, His Highness clapped her on the shoulder. "Save that sort of talk for Mother and Father. I suspect it'll hold you in good stead when you go to Lavia, too!"

He forgave her with an older brother's affection. She lifted her head and mustered a smile.

Sophie came along and started clearing the table. With a buoyant tone, she

said, “The tea’s gotten cold by now. I’ll go and make some more.”

The other ladies-in-waiting started moving around as well, deliberately affecting a lively attitude. Despite the sad truths behind it all, the case had been solved. The prince and princess both sat down again, their moods brightening somewhat, and Lord Simeon and I did the same.

Princess Henriette looked at Lord Simeon. “Well done. I’d never have guessed that Pearl was the intended victim.”

He met this compliment with a half-smile. “Embarrassing though it is to admit, I didn’t realize it either until Marielle told me. Our investigation focused on Nadia’s background and her relationships with others at the palace. Her dislike of animals seemed like an incidental detail.”

“Indeed,” said His Highness. “I felt quite certain that one of us royals was in the crosshairs. Me, Henri, or Mother—certainly one of us. Nadia seemed no more than a minion being puppeteered by some shadowy figure or other.”

All eyes were fixed on me. Even His Highness and Lord Simeon looked unusually impressed. *I appreciate it, but I do wish they were more generous with their admiration the rest of the time!*

“What made it fall into place?” asked the princess. “Was there some decisive piece of evidence?”

“I wouldn’t say that, exactly. It’s more that I had a different perspective than everyone else.”

A fresh cup of tea was poured for me, so I said thank you and drank a sip before continuing.

“Rather than political goings-on, I tend to think primarily about human relationships and individuals’ emotions. You see this sort of thing in the papers every single day—crimes that were committed for the slightest of reasons. A fire that almost killed somebody might turn out to be caused by a domestic dispute. The criminal who terrorized an actress might have an irrational hatred of blondes.”

“Stop reading those lowbrow tabloids.” The admiration from my husband disappeared in a flash. He furrowed his brow and glared as per usual.

I don't discriminate! I give all the newspapers a once-over to get all the information I can. Why wouldn't that be praiseworthy?

I chose to ignore his comment. "It stood out to me that Nadia's temperament had changed so drastically since the first time I saw her. Her demeanor when handling Pearl was quite conspicuous as well. As I mentioned earlier, we've never used rat poison at my house because of the danger to pets, so I was able to connect that to the arsenic."

"Goodness."

Admittedly, Nadia had made Julianne the target of her anger for reasons that couldn't be justified, and had falsely accused her of a crime. She had also tried to kill a dog, and put the royal family in harm's way. There was no defending her actions. Still, I had my doubts about the extent of her maliciousness.

"I must say, I doubt she meant for Julianne to be sentenced to death. I never sensed quite such malicious intent from her. She probably decided to pin the crime on Julianne without a clear picture of what that would entail. Most likely, she imagined that she would be prevented from becoming crown princess, and little more. I'm not trying to downplay the weight of her crime, of course. I merely think it's worth considering."

I looked over at Prince Severin. He did not give in to emotion and reject my implied suggestion, but rather nodded with a serious gaze. "Julianne and I aren't even engaged yet, after all. Pearl is out of harm's way to boot. Nadia shouldn't have an outlandishly heavy sentence imposed on her. She shall be punished appropriately."

Although there was a legal process, in cases of this nature, sentences tended to be decided by the royal family. Parliament wouldn't present any opposition; if His Highness had wished for Nadia to be sentenced to death, this would probably have been granted. However, rather than engage in such tyranny, he had promised to take a more delicate approach.

Relief was visible on the face of Princess Henriette, too. She had no doubt been harboring some lingering feelings of guilt.

His Highness smiled. "Perhaps it's ill-advised to say so given the abominable circumstances, but I must say I'm rather glad. Thank goodness we can put all

this nastiness behind us.”

“Yes,” Lord Simeon replied, but his tone suggested he was anything but reassured. Though everyone else seemed to consider the matter settled, he alone was left with a troubled expression.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Everyone turned to look at him, and he shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong—not exactly. There’s one question still nagging at me, that’s all. Nadia’s motive is perfectly clear, but where did she actually get the arsenic?”

“Couldn’t she have bought it from a shop?”

“She spends almost her entire life sequestered in the palace. Unless she had a day off, she couldn’t go out and buy any, and there’s no record of her having left the palace grounds recently. Her plan to poison the dog can’t have been conceived before she was assigned to the princess’s chambers, though, so she must have acquired it after that.”

I exchanged glances with His Highness and the princess. Now that he mentioned it, this was indeed rather odd. For that matter, even if she had bought it from a shop, it was quite a specialist product, being deadly poison. It was handled rather strictly and couldn’t be purchased just anywhere.

“They must use it in the kitchens, I imagine. Could she have asked to borrow some? Or stolen it, perhaps?”

“She wouldn’t know where it was stored. Despite her unfortunate childhood, she is still a nobleman’s daughter, so she joined as a fairly high-ranking housemaid and was never made to do beginner work such as kitchen duty. Also, given that she was trying to make the poisoning look like someone else’s doing, it’s inconceivable that she would have asked someone else for it. That would reveal too much.”

“Hmm, I see what you mean.”

“Since she loved cleanliness and hated animals, it is possible that she had it in reserve all along. Anyway, I’ll learn about it when I question her, but it does make me wonder.”

With that, Lord Simeon stood, probably to go and interrogate Nadia straight away. He shot me a look that was clearly meant as a reminder to get back to work. Though I'd wanted to stay and chat a while longer, I put my teacup down and stood up also.

His Highness took that as his cue as well and rose from his seat. With everyone rushing to take their leave, Princess Henriette looked rather forlorn. Even Pearl, who had been so excited earlier, had begun to drift into what looked like a comfortable sleep. *How unbearably cute—to me, anyway. I suppose there are some people who witness such a sight and feel only revulsion.* Reflecting on this, I realized that I, too, tended to assume that everyone was partial to animals as a matter of course. Those who *didn't* like them must have found this rather insensitive.

“At any rate,” said Princess Henriette, “with all that cleared up, there’s nothing standing in the way of your engagement, is there, brother dear? Now that the truth has come to light, I’m sure Mother won’t oppose it. Well done, Severin! You’ve managed it at last!”

Despite the hint of good-natured teasing in her congratulations, he looked happy. The ladies-in-waiting joined her, exuberantly expressing their best wishes all at once.

Awkward as it was to deflate the celebratory atmosphere, there was something I had to mention. “Her Majesty isn’t the only remaining obstacle, I believe. You haven’t received an answer from Julianne yet, have you?”

The breath caught in his throat. In an instant, his dark eyes turned into hollow, sunken pits.

“Honestly, Marielle,” Lord Simeon chided.

“It’s no use hiding from the truth,” I declared solemnly. “If you start dancing around in joy without looking at your feet, you’ll only trip over and hurt your own feelings.”

My husband did not protest any further. He merely turned a look of pity on his master, who appeared rather beaten down by the harsh reality of the situation.

Chapter Twelve

The aftermath of the incident took some time, and the royal family had other official duties to contend with as well, so Julianne's official meeting with the queen was postponed until three days later.

When the time finally came, I stood and watched by the wall alongside Yvonne and the queen's other ladies-in-waiting. This was a personal gathering of family members, so rather than the audience chamber, a small salon was used. The queen's oldest daughter, Lucienne, was also in attendance, as was her husband, Duke Chaliere.

As befitting a room at the palace, it had a majestic ambiance despite its small size. The carpet on the floor and the upholstery on the chairs were both the same subdued shade of red, while the chairs' armrests and legs, as well as the finely detailed decorations elsewhere in the room, were lavish in their use of gold. Grandiose though it was, the decor had a sense of unity about it, crafting a refined image overall. In front of the wall murals depicting scenes from myths and legends, the royals and nobles engaged in friendly chatter. Distinguished-looking gentlemen, beautiful ladies with flowing trains on their dresses... It made me want to sigh with pleasure. This whole room, including the people inside it, was so perfect, it was like a painting come to life.

When His Majesty the King entered, the mood stiffened at once. All present stood from their chairs and gave a bow or curtsy to the monarch. We ladies-in-waiting also lowered our heads in deference. He passed by me, and in a moment of nervous curiosity, I looked up slightly. His eyes looked straight into mine for a second, and he smiled as if sharing a private joke.

Perhaps it's just me, but he seems far more of a mischievous fellow than I expected. Well, I suppose his daughters have to take after someone. Where did His Highness's more serious nature come from, though? His mother, perhaps? That only leaves the question of where his pathetic side originated.

Now the entire royal family was assembled. The stage was set.

Julianne was brought in via a separate door. Rather than a housemaid's uniform, she wore a lovely dress that I suspected His Highness had provided. It was a summery number made of white cotton lace with red ribbons, striking a perfect contrast with her bountiful black hair. It was somewhat on the young side for a girl turning nineteen this year, but it suited her nonetheless.

My word, there's certainly a preponderance of black hair in this room. Even Duke Chaliar had some royal blood, so his hair and eyes were dark as well. As a blond, Lord Simeon really stood out in this company.

With a nervous expression, Julianne walked forward and presented herself with a slightly awkward curtsy. Every member of the royal family was staring at her, which must have been rather taxing. I felt anxious merely watching from the sidelines. *Don't be intimidated, Julianne! You definitely fit in here, even if it's only due to your hair color!*

The king and queen looked at one another briefly and exchanged a nod. All the talking was then left to the queen, with the king keeping a silent watch over the proceedings.

"Good day to you once again," said Her Majesty. "I'm terribly sorry that I wasn't able to talk to you the other day. All that business was most unfortunate."

"Yes," came the nervous reply. "Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Julianne Sorel. I'd like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for granting me the honor of an audience."

Despite her obvious hesitancy, she answered with more conviction than I'd expected. When push came to shove, she was capable of strengthening her resolve and taking the offensive. That fighting spirit was what I really wanted her to show the queen.

"I suppose everyone is aware of all the details by now," said Her Majesty, "so let's move on to the matter at hand. You've been put forward as a candidate for the crown prince's hand. However, before I can offer my opinion, it's become imperative that you and I meet face to face. I've also been told that you haven't officially responded to his proposal. Will you be able to give him an answer here and now?"

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Giving a firm reply, Julianne stood up straight. Though her face had been pale with apprehension, some color returned to it, a sign that her courage had returned.

Prince Severin went to her side. They faced each other, barely a step or two apart. “Julianne,” he began.

“Yes?” Her amber-colored eyes looked back at him. She no longer tried to escape his gaze.

“First of all, I’d like to update you on the subject of your wages. I gave it a look as promised, but given how things have come along, I’m afraid it won’t be a monthly salary, but a daily one.”

After he’d approached in such a suave and decisive manner, his first words were remarkably mundane. I slumped forward slightly. *Really? That’s where you’re starting?*

Everyone else had very much the same reaction. However, Julianne’s eyes sparkled as if this was exactly what she’d been waiting to hear about. “That’s absolutely fine!”

“Twenty-eight algiers per day. A pittance, really, but it was calculated based on the standard monthly wage of a housemaid in her trial period. Since it’s a live-in position, the sum includes a deduction for living costs—food and the like. However, twenty-eight algiers is the net pay, with no further costs payable on your end.”

“Understood.”

Aha, I can already see the calculations running inside her mind. One day’s wages would be enough to buy one book with change left over. Counting the number of days so far, she’d even have enough for another copy for evangelizing purposes, and she could buy a present for her brother, too. After that, there’d be quite a bit left to put aside or use on household expenses. I was certain that every one of these points had occurred to her in that moment.

Though there was nothing romantic or passionate about all this, it was exactly right for capturing Julianne’s heart. It wasn’t that she was eager for the money

as such. What mattered was the reassurance that he didn't see her needs as a waste of time. He had shown her all the consideration she asked for and deserved.

Indeed, His Highness had come here knowing exactly how to prove to Julianne how he felt.

"From what the head housemaid and your instructors tell me, you applied so much elbow grease that they would immediately sign you up as a permanent employee. They said that if you wished it, you could have a long-term contract without question. I fear that would be rather a pain in the neck for me, however."

"I could say the same. I'd be worried about leaving home for so long."

"Alas, that will be the case if you marry me as well. You will have to leave your home at some point. You might want to keep that in mind."

Julianne froze for a moment, so he quickly changed course.

"Don't worry about it, mind! Personally I think it's a grand old thing, leaving home! I'll also ensure your family isn't left adrift without any support!"

He was struggling, but I silently offered my encouragement. The queen and the other royals didn't look especially impressed, but if he could stand firm, I was certain he'd succeed.

"One more thing. If you marry me, you'll be issued a stipend especially for the crown princess's usage. It's mainly for expenses associated with official business, and to allow you to be dressed in a manner befitting of the royal family, all that rot, but provided you're not ludicrously extravagant, you will never use it all up. The remainder may be used however you like. You can collect more beloved volumes for your reading room than you could ever count."

"I'm not sure if a reading room is exactly where I'd like to store them. I envision a space that's more like a hideaway. A great number of bookshelves arranged tightly in a narrow room—that would have far more atmosphere."

"I don't mind building a hideaway, a secret base, or anything else you can imagine! In fact, let's share it. I'll put my books in there as well. Quite frankly,

the books I've been reading lately feel out of place on any shelves visitors might catch sight of."

He has a point. Having those particular books on display in his reading room might seem somewhat questionable. As glad as I am to have a newfound kindred spirit, prudence is only sensible!

"I didn't mind ordering them, but how to deal with them afterward has been quite a conundrum. For now I've been stashing them away in a locked drawer."

"You sound a bit like my brother Isidore. He has some magazines with *interesting* drawings that he got from who knows where, and I found them under his bed. I just pretended I hadn't seen them, thinking, boys will be boys!"

"Rookie error, I must say. That's the first place anyone's likely to go looking. Yes, I remember it well."

I couldn't help looking at my husband. *I wonder what Lord Simeon used to hide under the bed? When I get home I'll have to ask his mother.*

He studiously ignored me and simply cleared his throat. This sound was enough to make His Highness suddenly pull himself together.

"The point I'm getting at is that you'll be able to continue with your hobby to your heart's content. Going to the bookshop yourself will be less of an everyday affair, but perhaps the two of us can go out in secret every once in a while. We are afforded that measure of freedom. That being the case, could I ask you to look at it from an optimistic angle? If there are any other hitches along the way, we can find a way to tackle them together, so will you be my princess? My wife?"

He took her hand and appealed to her. She seemed to be embarrassed to be the center of attention, but she didn't offer an evasive answer as she had before.

"Yes. I'd be happy to."

"Exactly, I'll do everything I can to ensure you're happy, so—wait. Did you just say what I think you said?" He blinked repeatedly. It was as if the words had reached his ears but didn't quite make sense to him yet. "Really? You'll marry me?" He stared back at her in wonder.

With an amused yet bashful smile, she replied, “I will. Your Highness, I’d be honored to marry you.”

He leaned forward eagerly. “Do you mean it? You’ll actually, truly be my wife?”



The crown prince, turning twenty-eight this year, was as joyful as a little boy. In a strange reversal, Julianne seemed to be the mature one despite her much younger years. She briefly glanced at the king and queen and nodded, then looked back at him before replying. “That depends on whether it’s permitted, of course, but I gladly accept your proposal. I must apologize for not giving you a clear answer until now. I’m afraid my perspective on the matter was quite unkind to you.”

“Unkind? How so?”

“I’ve doubted you all along. I’m not suggesting that your efforts to woo me were a mere game to you—I don’t see you as insincere in that sense. However, I wasn’t sure to what extent you truly wished to be with me. In fact, I was unsure whether you even knew that yourself.”

My friend, always prudent to the point of pessimism and occasionally rather scathing, had not looked at the prince only as an object of yearning. She was confessing to him that she had always looked at the situation rationally and harbored some misgivings.

“There are cases where opposition to a match only fuels the flames of desire. I feared that might have applied to you in this case—that, because there would be obstacles to marrying me, it made you want me even more, as if you were intoxicated by the feeling of being the romantic hero from a story.”

He looked back at her, but didn’t interrupt.

“When I came to the palace,” she continued, “things didn’t exactly go smoothly. I decided that your reaction, your way of dealing with it all, would provide ample opportunity for me to see if your feelings toward me were genuine. I hoped it would allow you to make sure of that, too. Even after you’d already put so much effort into understanding me, I’m afraid I still held on to those doubts. I’m so terribly sorry.”

“It’s quite all right,” he said at last. Even hearing she had doubted him, he showed no sign of anger. Though he may have been slightly hurt, he was strong and kind enough that forgiving her was a matter of course.

Julianne offered a gentle smile in return. Her face showed no hint of anything

but happiness now.

“If you’re happy to accept my proposal now, shall I take that to mean that I measure up after all?”

Julianne looked full to bursting. Her joy had her almost at the point of tears. “You’ve done everything I could possibly wish for. How could anyone doubt you after that? I’m sorry for being so difficult to please. I’ve no doubt there will be plenty more occasions when I’m suspicious and pessimistic.”

“I don’t mind one whit. From another perspective, that simply means you’re prudent and wise.”

“As of now, I don’t have any of the knowledge required of a crown princess. I have to learn it all from scratch, and I’m sure I’ll end up making embarrassing blunders and causing you no end of trouble. Everyone is sure to talk about me behind my back. I won’t be a wife you can be proud of. Are you certain you’re prepared for that?”

“Let people say what they want. I’ll be more proud of you than words can describe. You have a clear sense of finances, you’re practically minded, and you have your own opinions. Though you appear meek on the surface, you can be tough enough to say what needs to be said. Above all, you’re a hard worker who always perseveres. That’s a cracking disposition to have, isn’t it? I do have a foreboding sense that I’ll be a henpecked husband, but I’ll gladly be henpecked by you. Julianne, I want us to spend our lives together. Marry me, I beg you.”

“I will. I want to be with you forever, Your Highness. Let me stay by your side.”

With their feelings finally out in the open and all doom and gloom swept aside, they were a picture of bliss. I knew that joy as well—the glow that comes from making your feelings known to one another. In my mind’s eye, I looked back on the wintry scene where Lord Simeon and I had exuberantly confessed our love by the side of the pond. Now, a radiant light seemed to shine upon Julianne and Prince Severin. Immense relief washed over me, and as Lord Simeon watched them, a gentle smile formed on his face as well.

Hearing the ‘henpecked’ remark, Princess Henriette cut in with a jibe. “She’s

exactly what you need, brother dear!”

The queen also smiled wryly. “It appears that everything I wished to say has already been said. My misgivings were exactly the same as Julianne’s.”

Addressed again by the queen, the jubilant couple remembered that they weren’t alone. For a moment, they had slipped into their own private world. Realizing suddenly that the matter was actually not yet resolved, they hurriedly turned to face the king and queen, their faces tensing up.

Her Majesty’s expression, however, was soft and tender as she looked at Julianne. “You’ve captured the crown prince’s heart, and everyone else at the palace says you’re a fine young lady indeed. As such, I have no opposition to the match. If the two of you wish to marry, I will not stand in your way. However, it’s true that Julianne will face a great many challenges. It was rather a struggle for me when I married into the royal family as well. I’m sure you’ll find yourself quite distressed at times. I was worried about whether the crown prince would help you get through it all, or if he’d leave you to suffer alone.”

Even while referring to him in a formal and detached manner, she gazed at him with motherly eyes.

“Julianne needs to prepare herself, of course, but so do you. She’ll be entering a world that can be cruel and alien, so if you weren’t ready to keep her safe, I couldn’t have allowed you to marry her.” Turning to Julianne again, she said, “The reason I invited you to the palace was to test the crown prince. I’m sorry that I treated you so coldly without so much as an explanation.”

So the one the queen had been testing wasn’t Julianne, but His Highness? That meant her view of Julianne had already been settled by the time she spoke to me that fateful night. This came as quite a surprise.

Furthermore, it appeared that Julianne and Her Majesty had shared the same sort of worries. The two women had more in common than it seemed. For the first time, I sensed a certain affection from the queen, who had always come across as so awe-inspiringly stern.

Well, the prince is very much an ordinary person, so it stands to reason that the king and queen are as well. All of them are, really.

Having received an apology from the queen herself, Julianne's face grew pale again and she started to fervently express her gratitude. His Highness maintained a facade of composure, but inside I was sure he was extremely uncomfortable. *It must be terrifying at times to have a mother who never seems to be watching, but is actually seeing everything—including what's under the bed.*

Next to the queen, the king let out a laugh. "Miss Julianne," he began.

"Yes, Your Majesty?" This was the first time the king had spoken to her, and it left her even more petrified.

"I believe my children take after me. They all have a tendency to fall in love rather quickly, which might lead one to believe the feelings are mere whimsy. In fact, you can rest assured that if the crown prince offers his heart to you, even for a moment, he'll be devoted to you forever. I'm certain that he loves you from the bottom of his heart. I hope you'll repay him in kind and lend him your support."

Blushing awkwardly but with a happy smile, Julianne nodded. "I will, Your Majesty." Her cheeks, which had been pale with nerves, were now the color of roses.

I see! So that's what must have happened. His Majesty fell in love at first sight, just like his son did. I'm so eager to know more. Perhaps I'll have a chance to ask at some point. It would be such a shame if I couldn't take any notes on the love story of the erstwhile prince and princess.

When I looked around, I saw that Princess Lucienne had drawn closer to Duke Chalier. The only one without her beloved by her side, Princess Henriette, looked a little left out. She was no doubt thinking about Prince Liberto.

I looked at my husband and happened to meet his eyes. *If only I could share a smile with him. We shouldn't though, I suppose. While we're at work, we should maintain a businesslike expression. I wonder if he's thinking the same?* He immediately looked away, his face as impassive as ever. This did leave me disappointed, but I decided to focus all my efforts on maintaining the proper poise of a lady-in-waiting.

Now that the king and queen had given their permission, the relationship was

official. All the tension left the air.

Then, as if this was the long-awaited moment, the door opened again.

“Sorry I’m late. I hope everything’s been agreed upon.”

Duke Silvestre entered, greeting all present in a typically lethargic tone. His wife Christine was with him. Behind them, three more people entered—or rather, were forced to enter. Practically shoved inside by the chamberlain were some very familiar faces indeed.

Julianne murmured her surprise, while her parents, Baron and Baroness Sorel, looked this way and that with very flustered expressions. In contrast, her younger brother Isidore was bold and brazen as he strode in.

There were many questions on Julianne’s lips, but her mouth simply fell open, and she put a hand over it in shock. Duke Silvestre watched her, the usual vague smile behind his gray eyes.

My word. Even when he’s probably not thinking about anything in particular, he always looks like he’s planning something terrible. He’s the only one whose blackheartedness is too intense for me to fangirl over. I feel certain that he was a snake in a past life and I was a frog.

“Glad you could make it, Maurice,” said His Majesty. “And who might these fine people be?”

With a nod, the duke introduced the trio behind him. “Baron Dominic Sorel, his wife Adelaide, and their son and heir, Isidore. Since their daughter is also present, House Sorel is now assembled here in its entirety.”

Everyone’s eyes skipped right past the baron and baroness and focused on Isidore. I sensed that there was one thought on the royal family’s minds: *Ah, so that’s the boy who hid the scandalous magazines under his bed.* Apparently unaware of the awkward looks being directed his way, the thirteen-year-old boy ran over to his sister.

“Julianne, are you going to marry the prince?”

“Isidore! Restrain yourself, we’re in the presence of royalty!”

Though she hurriedly rebuked him, the impudent lad pouted and refused to

back down. “I thought Mother and Father were being stupid. I told them you were obviously just being toyed with. As if a prince would marry someone from a poor family like ours! And even if he did, he’d soon have a lover or two on the side and dozens of bastards. You’d never really be happy.”

“Isidore!”

With a look of desperation, Julianne raised her hand, about to quieten him not with an open palm, but with her fist. However, His Highness held her arm in place with one hand, and, with the other, grabbed Isidore by the collar.

Raised several inches off the ground, Isidore cried, “Put me down! Who are you, anyway, you cur!?”

With a casual air, His Highness grinned sneeringly. “This *cur* will be marrying your sister. It’s a pleasure to meet you, brother-in-law.”

Even with the knowledge that he was facing the crown prince, Isidore retained his aggressive attitude. This was how he was—too strong-willed to ever hide his true feelings and be respectful. He glared back with highly disapproving eyes at the man he saw as taking his sister for a ride. His parents blanched, while his sister practically bent over double as she tried to apologize.

Witnessing the family’s histrionic display, Duke Silvestre snorted, then turned back to the king and queen. “I’d like to report that the matter I’ve been taking charge of is concluded as well. Julianne Sorel will join House Silvestre as the adopted daughter of me and my wife.”

“What?”

Dumbfounded again, Julianne stared at the duke. I was in much the same state, and the princess looked somewhat surprised as well. Only Lord Simeon’s expression did not change one bit. Either he already knew, or he was hiding his shock with an iron will.

“Your parents’ approval has already been obtained. I believe this should resolve all remaining obstacles to your marrying His Highness.”

Julianne? Duke Silvestre’s adopted daughter? The thought of that man being Julianne’s father was not an entirely pleasant one. When I looked at him for a mere moment, he turned his dark smile on me, and I let out a quiet shriek. *Why*

does his smile have to be so terrifying!?

“The parents *did* consent willingly, yes?” asked the queen.

The duke glanced at them over his shoulder. Both the baron and baroness shrank back and looked as though they might faint.

“What parent would stand in the way of their daughter’s happiness?” the duke replied. “They were only happy to accept the offer.”

This was transparently a lie. I didn’t know exactly what had happened between them, but it was clear from their ashen faces that they had been threatened rather mercilessly. For once, I felt deep sympathy for the two of them. At the same time, I was glad that they had been more or less removed from the equation.

Isidore brushed off His Highness’s grip and put his arms around Julianne. “Will I never see you again? Can I not call you my sister anymore? That sounds horrible.”

“Oh, Isidore,” said Julianne, returning the embrace of her brother, who was still markedly shorter than her.

“No need to look so down in the dumps,” said His Highness. “She’s not moving to a far-off land. She’ll still be your sister, and you’ll absolutely be able to see her.”

“Really?” said Isidore, his face lighting up.

“Of course. You can even come to visit her at the palace. After you learn some manners, of course.”

Isidore grew sullen again. His Highness laughed mirthfully, drawing the others into a pleasant bout of laughter as well. Even the king and queen smiled amicably as they looked on. The only ones who weren’t in an upbeat mood were the Sorels, but I was sure they’d recover soon enough. They weren’t the sort of people to learn their lesson, so they’d no doubt be back to their old ways before I knew it. If there was one trait they shared in common with their daughter, it was a fundamental tenaciousness. I didn’t need to worry that they’d be upset forever.

The king and queen exchanged a meaningful glance, then stood.

“We have business to attend to, so we’ll take our leave at this juncture. We’ll leave the crown prince and the duke to handle any remaining discussion.”

Too busy to be drawn into any further conversation, they said their goodbyes and started making their way out into the corridor. The princesses stood as well to see them off.

As the queen’s lady-in-waiting, naturally I exited with her. Leaving when I knew there was more to come was disappointing, to say the least. However, I reminded myself that my work duties came first, and walked with a sense of duty.

But this will be ending soon, won’t it? There’s no need for me to stay at the palace any longer. I’ll be relieved of my post and allowed to go home.

Part of me felt sad about that, but the sheer relief, the sense that a burden was being lifted from my shoulders, was far stronger. I wanted to be home again, waiting for my husband to return at the end of each day. I wanted to start writing a new book in my wonderful study. In my breaks from work I’d done my best to see what palace life was like from the staff’s point of view, so I’d been able to gather some reference material after all. The idea of a prince as the love interest was appealing as well.

As we proceeded along the corridor, a man approached and spoke to the king.

“Your Majesty, good afternoon.”

The low voice startled me slightly. This handsome man with a well-trimmed goatee had been waiting for the king to pass by.

“What is it, Marquess Rafale?”

“I’m sorry to bother you so suddenly, but I’m wondering if I might be able to beg a few moments of your time.”

The marquess had ambushed the king with his usual pair of hangers-on in tow. I wondered what the reformist faction wished to demand of His Majesty.

Though the king’s expression said he was less than enthusiastic, he turned to

the chamberlain, who presented a pocket watch without even being asked. After checking the time, the king nodded to the marquess. “If thirty minutes is enough, then certainly. After that I’m busy, I’m afraid.”

“Thank you most kindly.”

The king said goodbye to his wife with a casual wave of the hand, then walked off to a different room. Marquess Rafale and his companions followed. Though the marquess bowed to the queen as he left, the other two men looked at her with decidedly unsettling eyes.

I’d forgotten all about them. Is there no end to the problems faced by the monarchy? The path awaiting my best friend was filled with pitfalls. I hoped that I could do more than simply encourage and reassure her. I wanted to actively help her somehow—even if being a woman made it difficult to have an impact in the political realm. As we walked on, I mulled over what I might be able to do.

That was the last day of my short-lived career as a lady-in-waiting.

There is one postscript to add. When we finally returned to our bedroom at the Flaubert manor, I asked Lord Simeon what had happened next with regard to the investigation. Nadia had apparently given some rather concerning testimony about how she acquired the arsenic.

“Her lover gave it to her?”

“Yes, that’s what she says.”

After her arrest, Nadia stopped protesting and straightforwardly responded to questioning. According to her statement, the arsenic she laced the cheese with had been given to her by a man she was seeing.

“She’s not the sort of person to keep her worries to herself, it seems. Just as she told anyone who would listen that she hated animals, she freely confessed to her lover, and only him, about both the business with the dog and her jealousy toward Miss Julianne.”

“And who is this man?”

Lord Simeon was sitting on a chair in front of me while I stood and styled his

just-washed blond hair. As I attentively ran the pomade through it with a comb, his manageable locks became neat and tidy with no real effort at all. In the lamplight illuminating the room, he glimmered like an angel in a painting.

It made me so happy to peacefully spend time together. All reason for worry was gone now. I could fawn over my husband to my heart's content.

I wouldn't say I disliked working, but being at home definitely suits me better. Even if we're both busy during the day, I at least want to spend the evening with him like this.

"He sounds like something of a scoundrel," said Lord Simeon, looking rather disgruntled. "We left to try and capture him immediately, but he was gone without a trace."

"He heard Nadia was arrested and abandoned her to her fate? What a horrible lover."

"Nadia believed they were lovers, but *he* certainly didn't. Upon further investigation, we established that he was also courting several other housemaids. He whispered sweet nothings to them all and convinced each of them that she was his one and only."

"My word."

The sheer unscrupulousness made me pause what I was doing. Cheating playboys were hardly a rare occurrence, but one who handed out arsenic was more than the everyday variety.

"Could he have developed intimate relationships with those housemaids with a goal in mind?" I suggested. "To use them?"

"Yes, most likely. He told Nadia that the arsenic wasn't lethal—that it would merely cause a temporary stomach ache. Nadia has been secluded in the palace since she was twelve years old, so she's underinformed about more worldly matters. She knew that arsenic was a poison, but she didn't know how deadly it was. There is such a thing as weaker arsenic as well, so it wasn't hard to pull the wool over her eyes."

"Hold on, though. Nadia wanted to kill the dog, didn't she? Why would she have wanted non-lethal poison?"

I tilted my head in puzzlement. Lord Simeon stood and took the comb from my hands. He placed it on the table and ushered me over to the bed. I untied my hair and draped my lace shawl over the back of the chair.

“The man didn’t care about eliminating the dog. His plan was for Miss Julianne to serve the adulterated tea to His Highness and the others and have her take the blame for the ill effects.”

We put out the lamps and got into bed. The just-risen moon shone into the room with a dim light.

“In other words, he tricked Nadia,” I said. “In fact, he was using her as part of a plot to kill several members of the royal family. Your suspicions, and His Highness’s, were on the mark.”

“Indeed. Ultimately, though, Nadia wavered. Instead of following the directions she’d been given, she stopped anyone from drinking it, deciding that this detail didn’t really matter. As long as the tea itself was found to be poisoned, the result would be the same. We were saved not only by Miss Julianne’s quick-wittedness, but also Nadia’s good heart.”

If Nadia had acted as ordered, the royals would have drunk the poisoned tea. They had only narrowly avoided losing their lives.

This revelation made me tremble, but it did fit what I knew. No matter how much Nadia envied Julianne, jumping straight to poisoning someone seemed out of character. Though it made sense that she was trying to kill the dog and didn’t want His Highness or anyone else to drink the tea, the overall plan wasn’t one that an ordinary girl was likely to conceive of. Her history at the palace also painted her as serious and dedicated rather than a troublemaker.

“Nadia’s own aims were exactly as you deduced. She’s admitted to this directly. Knowing that arsenic was used as a rat poison, she concluded it would probably have a stronger effect on an animal much smaller than a human, and thus she laced the cheese with it. The man pulling her strings misread her feelings somewhat. He didn’t realize that her hatred of the dog was stronger than her jealousy toward Miss Julianne. Presumably, he saw her animal aversion as less intense than it truly was, much like Princess Henriette did. Rather fortunate for us.”

Lord Simeon threw his head back onto the pillow. He heaved a sigh laden with both relief and concern about the still-unresolved problem.

“So who *was* the man pulling her strings?” I asked.

“I don’t know. His personal details in the staff register were probably all forged. We’ve appealed to the police for assistance and a search is underway, but I’m not entirely confident that he’ll be caught.”

The capital, Sans-Terre, was a big city with a million inhabitants. Just as Lord Simeon had hinted, tracking down one man was like finding a needle in a haystack.

I peered down at his face from above. “That reminds me. What was it Ambassador Nigel told you about at that ball? It sounded as though he’d received some disquieting information. I didn’t have a chance to ask you about it, but was it something about the Republic of Orta? Did he tell you they were plotting some intrigue—and was it connected to this incident, perhaps?”

He put his hand on my shoulder and pulled me down toward him. I rested against his chest while his large hand stroked my head, gently soothing me.

“No, it wasn’t along those lines. The information was that Orta is on the verge of declaring open war on Smerda. The two countries have been at each other’s throats for a while now, so it’s hardly surprising.”

Smerda was a country situated even further east than Orta. Their location made them Orta’s neighbor on the opposite side from us. Much as Lavia was nestled between Easdale and Lagrange, Orta was sandwiched between Lagrange and Smerda.

If they’re waging war on one of their neighbors, I can imagine how it certainly could be related.

“They’ve had territorial disputes at the border, I recall. Are they afraid of Lagrange joining forces with Smerda and unleashing a pincer attack? If so, it would make perfect sense for them to preemptively engage in some subterfuge.”

“Perhaps,” he replied, avoiding a clear answer. He sat up and twisted around. Now he was the one looking down at me.

“His phrasing definitely suggested some kind of secret plot on Orta’s part,” I insisted. “It sounded that way to me, at least.”

“We can’t rule out the possibility. Nor can we make assumptions. As His Highness said, there are too many possibilities—it’s too early to rule any of them out. No need to worry too much about Orta in particular, though. We’ll investigate them alongside all the rest.”

“Even so, I—mmph!”

Before I could say another word, his lips covered mine.

“I’ve missed this,” he said afterward. “It feels like an age since we’ve spent the night together.”

“An age? It’s hardly been that long, has it? Besides, you stayed in my room just the other night.”

“I found it difficult to relax there. There’s truly nothing quite like home.”

“You seemed perfectly relaxed to me, you liar. Honestly! And you have to work tomorrow, don’t you? We’d better make a start.”

“When did you become so forthright? Are you no longer frightfully embarrassed about the whole thing? And it was so sweet.”

“*Must* you say that!?”

As we half-jokingly argued in the moonlight, something struck Lord Simeon all of a sudden. He grunted lightly in surprise. My cat had taken an energetic leap up onto his back.

“Chouchou!” I exclaimed. “Did you do that on purpose?”

From the impact, I suspected she’d taken a running start. She’d no doubt applied her claws as well. My husband screwed up his face in pain as she walked down him, descended, and forcibly inserted herself between us. Snuggling up against my bosom, she ostentatiously made her presence known and started dozing. *I’d understand acting this way during the colder months, but not now. It’s like she’s trying to assert her authority over Lord Simeon!*

“Naughty girl. Don’t step all over your daddy.”

“I’m her daddy?”

“She’s my baby, so you must be her daddy.”

“It sounds almost as though she’s your child from a previous marriage.” He sighed with resignation and moved to make space. Despite his bitter expression, he reached out and stroked the cat. This was so unbearably charming that I burst into laughter.

The rumbling sound of her purr started lulling me to sleep. Being able to spend the night with my husband and my cute little baby made me too happy for words. The mundanity of it made it all the more precious. My heart was filled with gratitude and joy.

We said good night to each other and fell asleep while holding hands to avoid disturbing the cat. Savoring the finest luxury in all the world, I surrendered myself to the sea of happiness.

Chapter Thirteen

July saw an increase in temperature. A brilliant blue sky shone over the Kingdom of Lagrange on Foundation Day.

This was a public holiday, so schools and workplaces were closed, but the palace would be holding a number of events. This included an engagement ceremony for Julianne and His Highness.

After passing through the main gate, it took quite some time for our carriage to reach the entrance. So many visitors had descended on the palace that the normally spacious pathway was crammed full of people, with finely dressed ladies and gentlemen as far as the eye could see.

Far more of the ladies were wearing those constrictive dresses than at the last function I'd attended. Naturally, my mother-in-law had insisted that I also be squeezed into one she had eagerly ordered to be tailor made for me. *This look's become fashionable after all, I see. Style has taken precedence over practicality. I'll grant they're marvelous to look at, but this is exactly the type of trend I can do without!*

Lord Noel gazed over the crowds. "We'll never find Simeon amongst all this."

Naturally, Lord Simeon had to work today. The royal guards could never take time off on an important day like today.

"I imagine the Captain will stay with the royal family and Lord Simeon will be patrolling. I doubt he'll stay in one place too long."

The twenty-four-year-old puppy began to snarl. "Gah! I wanted to see Simeon looking all gallant! That's what I was most looking forward to!"

Exchanging a glance, Lord Noel and I chuckled.

My father-in-law got out of the carriage in front and called to us. "Let's get a move on. Be sure to keep sight of one another. Don't fall behind!"

I picked up the long train dragging behind me and draped it over my left arm.

There was no need to worry about it getting dirty or torn due to the dust ruffle sewn onto the underside, but given the crowds, someone would definitely step on it. My mother-in-law set off walking in the same manner.

This was a gathering of high-class people only, so despite the numbers, there was no pushing and shoving, or squabbles breaking out. It was quite unlike a similar scene would be in the city. We proceeded slowly, exchanging hellos with familiar faces as we happened upon them.

Then a scream erupted nearby.

Had someone fallen down? I caught sight of people looking at the ground. Watching their movement and their gazes, it became clear that there was something moving at their feet. Another high-pitched scream followed. Then, from beneath a noblewoman's dress, a black and white ball of fluff showed its face.

"Pearl!?"

That snub-nosed face was unmistakable—it was Princess Henriette's dog. *What in the world is she doing here?* I hurriedly slipped through the crowd and took hold of the scared and agitated puppy.

"Calm down, girl. There, there, it's all right now. It's me, Marielle. Do you remember me? Easy now."

After lifting her up, I stroked her and continued to reassure her. She was trembling all over and panting anxiously. Getting lost in this crowd must have given her quite a shock.

"Did you escape, you naughty little thing? Were you trying to find your owner? The servants must be worried sick."

Lord Simeon's brothers stopped, but it was clearly a struggle not to be carried away by the flow.

"Miss Marielle, what's wrong?" said Lord Noel.

"What are you hanging back for?" Lord Adrien demanded. "If we don't hurry up, then—oh, excuse me!"

They were getting in the way of others trying to pass, so I told them to go on

ahead. “I’ve found a lost dog. The princess’s beloved pet has escaped from the palace, so I’d better make sure she gets back.”

Holding her tightly in my arms, I cut through the waves of nobles, apologizing at every turn as I bumped into people. Eventually, I made it through the throng. With a breath of relief and exhaustion, I made my way toward another entrance.

It wasn’t long before a royal guard stopped me. “Where are you going? The route is back that way. No other entry is allowed today.”

The knights were dotted about the grounds, keeping a watchful eye to ensure that no one was trying to infiltrate the palace using the crowd as a cover.

Since my intentions were entirely above board, I answered plainly, “I’m Marielle Flaubert. I’m helping this little doggy get back home.”

The name ‘Flaubert’ clued him in that I was the wife of his superior officer. With a gasp of realization, the knight saluted. “My apologies!”

“No no, if anyone should be apologizing it’s me. Anyway, about her.” I pointed to the puppy in my arms. Now that we’d gotten away from the crowd, she had calmed down a great deal. “She’s Princess Henriette’s pet dog. I think she escaped from the princess’s chambers.”

“Oh dear,” he replied uncomfortably.

“I’d like to bring her back, but perhaps you’d rather I left her in your care? If you’ll allow it, I certainly don’t mind taking her myself.”

“Right, yes, good question. Do you mind waiting a moment?”

The knight went to inform a nearby colleague, then quickly returned and led me on. However, he evidently couldn’t leave his post unmanned for too long. As soon as he found a member of the palace staff, he flagged the man down and asked him to escort me the rest of the way.

The young man looked somewhat annoyed, but he couldn’t refuse a request from a royal guard, so he took over and brought me inside the palace. At no point did he suggest taking responsibility for the dog. Whether it was because he wasn’t keen on dogs or simply couldn’t be bothered with the additional

effort, he left Pearl in my hands right up until the end.

Sure enough, when we reached Princess Henriette's chambers, we found the housemaids fretting over Pearl's absence and searching for her everywhere. When I arrived, they were overjoyed and practically thanked me on hands and knees. The princess's precious pet going missing must have been awfully stressful for them. I was relieved as well to have safely returned the dog and resolved all this trouble—but I wasn't allowed to relax for long, as the man quickly began ushering me out.

I had to get back anyway, so I happily followed. Then, after we'd retraced our steps a short way, he turned to me and said, "You remember the way, don't you? Can you manage on your own?"

"Well, yes."

"In that case, could I trouble you to go on without me? If I'm waylaid too long, my boss'll give me quite a talking-to."

"Oh, I see. Sorry to have troubled you."

He turned his back and sped off before I'd even finished speaking. *He did seem quite impatient from the start, I suppose. It must have been especially irritating that I have to move so slowly in this dress.*

Before I knew it, he had disappeared around a corner. I thanked him out loud, though he might not have heard me.

If he hadn't been in *quite* such a hurry, I'd definitely have asked if it was really acceptable for me to be left to wander the corridors on my own. True, I wasn't exactly suspicious, nor did I mean to do any harm. Still, though, now that I'd quit as a lady-in-waiting, I had no official reason to be there. On today of all days, wasn't it even worse than usual for me to be left to act as I wanted with no supervision?

Something about the situation left me uncomfortable. I hurried myself along, eager to return as quickly as I could. However, with my stride so restricted, all I could do was shuffle along at a slightly fast walk. I powered ahead with fierce determination, as if trying to win a race, but I quickly ran out of breath.

This is exactly why I find these dresses so detestable! I know it's unlikely to be

a problem because a refined lady won't often find herself competing in a race, but what good would that do me if I were to be trapped in a fire?

I stopped when I arrived at an unremarkable-looking door. Beyond it, I knew, was a corridor for staff usage. The servants tended not to use the main corridors, instead keeping to hidden ones.

Taking a shortcut wouldn't be so bad, would it?

The servant corridors connected every part of the palace, so they'd help me reunite with the Flaubert clan more quickly. I took the liberty of opening the door and entering the narrow passage. I was concerned about time, and rushing had simply worn me out. Taking the direct route felt like a harmless choice.

I headed off in what I judged was probably the right direction. Though I expected to come across a housemaid here or there, I didn't encounter anyone at all. They had apparently all been recruited to help with the various events. Finding someone to point the way would have been helpful, but I was moderately confident of where I was going. While working for the queen I'd been sent out on errands, so I roughly knew the layout of the main palace building.

I kept the location of the great hall in mind and aimed for that. When I came to a door at the end of a passage, I stepped outside into the main corridor again.

"Where am I?"

I'd expected to exit near the staircase leading down to the first floor, but I was in the middle of a corridor. It was rather narrow, with doors lining both sides. Thanks to the skylights along the ceiling, it wasn't overly dark at least, but I had absolutely no idea where I had emerged.

Oh dear. Did I take a wrong turn? I imagine the room opposite will have a window, though, so maybe I can look outside and see roughly where I am.

I walked over to the door and knocked. No reply came. I put my hand on the doorknob and promptly opened it. Peeking inside, I had the sense that it was someone's office.

The rather compact room had no chairs for hosting visitors, and bookshelves

lined the walls. It looked as though there was indeed a window on the far side, but it was hidden by a curtain that hung all the way to the floor. In front of this was an imposing desk that made me suspect this room belonged to a government official of some sort rather than a staff member.

It wasn't a room I should have been entering without permission, but with a silent apology, I slipped inside. A vague feeling of guilt made me close the door behind me so no one saw. Though I absolutely knew I wasn't doing anything too wrong, I feared the inevitable misunderstandings, so I acted somewhat stealthily.

I hurried over to the curtain. Lifting it up indeed revealed a window, so I stepped behind it to look outside.

Am I on the eastern side of the palace? I can see the old chapel some distance away—and before that, the battery. If I can see those from this angle, then, yes, I see where I am.

From my current location, I deduced the way to the great hall. Armed with new information, I was satisfied that I'd reach my goal.

I was about to turn around and return to the corridor, but suddenly I heard a noise behind me. It was the sound of the door being opened. Footsteps immediately followed. I was no longer alone. I'd been joined not by one person, but several. I froze in fear behind the curtain.

Is the room's occupant back already? Impeccable timing! Ugh, what am I going to do? If I'm found like this, obviously hiding where I shouldn't be, asking for directions will be the least of my concerns. It clearly looks suspicious, as though I'm a thief, perhaps even an assassin. No one would believe me if I said I simply got lost.

I gulped and clung to the window.

Please, don't come over here. Don't say it's too dark and open the window. Please, God!

"Well?" said a low voice. "What did you want to tell me?"

I'd definitely heard the man's voice before, I realized. I focused on listening while taking every effort to conceal my presence.

“Given the occasion, I can only assume it’s something important,” he added.

“The occasion is entirely relevant, in fact.”

This second voice sounded familiar as well. *Where have I heard it before? There’s something distasteful about it. Who is it?*

“It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” said a third man. “Everything’s in place for us to dispose of those pesky royals in one fell swoop and seize power for ourselves.”

For a moment I couldn’t quite believe what I was hearing. My mind failed to keep up. *What did he just say? Dispose of the royal family? Are THEY assassins?*

“Don’t talk nonsense,” said the low voice with a hint of bewilderment. “Do you mean to launch some sort of assault on the royal family? The guards would simply put a stop to it, I assure you.”

“The royal guards will have no way to intervene. In fact, the ones protecting the king will die right beside him.”

“Pure nonsense, as I said. You’ve gotten carried away.”

My heart thundered violently. *The royal guards will die with the king? But...that means... I know the Captain is with him. Is Lord Simeon with him as well? I expect he’s patrolling, but it’s possible he’ll regroup with them later. Is Lord Simeon...going to die? No. No, that can’t happen. He wouldn’t go down without a fight.*

As I trembled, it was a struggle not to pant and gasp. I forced myself to stay composed, telling myself that I absolutely must not let them hear me.

I cannot be discovered here. If what I’m hearing is true, I have to inform the knights straight away. I mustn’t be caught before that.

“You’re already aware, I’m sure, that prior to the Foundation Day ceremony, an engagement ceremony will be held for the crown prince. What if, directly before the key figures arrive, we sully the way into the chapel with piles of filth? What do you suppose would happen, hmm?”

No response from the low-voiced man, so the man answered his own question.

“In all likelihood, the royal family and honored guests would balk at the idea of walking through it. Even if an urgent and thorough cleaning was ordered, they’d no doubt feel it was an ill omen of some sort, so they’d want to change the venue. And what if, at that moment, it was suggested that they might use the *old* chapel?”

The old chapel. I cast my eyes to the building I’d looked at mere moments ago. *They’re planning to lead the royal family there? Why? What makes that their chosen location to gather them all in one place and assassinate them?*

“Those who share our convictions are leading them by the nose. The king and all those with him are already on their way to the old chapel, which can only be entered by way of the long staircase at the front of the building. Now imagine if that staircase were to be blocked. There would be no escape route.”

A moment’s silence—and tension in the air.

“One of our people is an engineer of sorts and constructed something rather terrific for us: a mechanism with gunpowder and oil that will ignite after a certain amount of time. If we blow up the neighboring administration building just before that, it will collapse onto the staircase below and cut off their escape. Then it’s just a matter of watching the old chapel go up in flames.”

Guttural laughs resounded.

The world grew dark before my eyes. Right now, the king and his whole family, Duke Silvestre and his wife, and even Julianne, of course, were all together. It was indeed the perfect chance to assassinate them all. The old chapel wasn’t especially spacious, so there might not be anywhere to take refuge and wait for the fire to be extinguished. In addition to the fire, a collapsed building would block their escape. That would make it difficult to even reach them from below to provide aid. Even ladders would be unlikely to reach so high.

Are they really doing this? Is this nightmare actually going to happen?

“The preparations are all complete. The royal family are about to begin the engagement ceremony without the slightest idea that they’re walking into their own graves. We shouldn’t do anything to draw attention. Our role now is simply to watch from a distance and pretend to be surprised. Then, once it’s complete,

we'll be counting on you to help restore order and seize power. Your assistance will be very much appreciated."

Finally, the man with the low voice responded. "Utter foolishness. You cannot truly intend to commit such an atrocity?"

"Intentions have nothing to do with it. The plan is already in progress. The security forces are all focused on the site of the Foundation Day ceremony. The old chapel wasn't going to be used, so it's only been given a cursory check. Once it was decided that the royal family would move there, the guards escorting them rushed to go there as well, but as we said, that means nothing. The whole lot of them will cheerfully burn to death together."

"You idiots!" Though until now I'd thought this one was entirely in cahoots with the other two, he upbraided them in a caustic tone. Their laughter stopped sharply. "What do you think is going to happen after your little scheme plays out!?"

"One way or another, our plans will finally have come to fruition. What are you getting so upset about?"

"I could ask why you fools are so nonchalant. Do you think that after successfully assassinating the royal family, we'll be able to seize power, just like that? Do you think we can simply keep all the country's political affairs running without any problems? That's an absurd delusion. Don't you see that it will lead to the worst possible outcome!?"

His words gave me pause. Unlike the other two, he seemed opposed to the very idea of assassination. Even though he wished for the monarchy to be abolished and all political power to be placed in parliament's hands, he apparently didn't think such extreme measures were the way to achieve that.

"Let's suppose that amid all the chaos and confusion, we do manage to seize power. It would still be seen as nothing more than usurping the throne. And even if no proof is found, we would definitely be the prime suspects. If we're believed to be behind the assassination, do you honestly believe we can run the government? Do you think everyone else will simply fall in line and obey? The military is made up almost entirely of monarchists! Are we supposed to stand up against a military that views us as the enemy!?"

Does this mean there's still hope? If he sees it in this light, could their awful plan still be halted?

After several minutes spent standing in place and listening, I happened to shift my gaze down to my feet and noticed something rather alarming—the train of my dress was sticking out from under the curtain! I had an instinctive, panicked urge to yank it toward me, but I strenuously resisted and instead pulled it as gently as I could. *I can only pray they don't notice. They're probably too absorbed in their conversation to look at the base of the curtain. I have to do this while I can. Slowly now...*

“That’s precisely where *you* come in. If you put in the effort to make yourself the rallying point, plenty of people will be ready to endorse you. We can even win over the military. All we need is a few more allies and the dawn will rise on a new era.”

“A new era? Pah. That will never happen by means of assassination. You’d just be continuing the history of bloodshed that has repeated since time immemorial. The new dawn we’re aiming for is a government by the people, for the people. One that’s truly representative and allows anyone to take part, regardless of their social status. Simply usurping the throne will never achieve that. Stop this plan at once! You cannot, *must not* murder the king!”

The sense of justice with which he spat his words contrasted sharply with the impression I’d had of him until now. I wanted to apologize for seeing him as purely power-hungry. I didn’t know if everything he was aiming for was right, but I could certainly see how having someone like him fostering debate and discussion could lead to a better government.

However, his urgent appeal fell on deaf ears.

“Awfully naive, aren’t you?” said one of the conspirators with a sigh, a clear ring of contempt filling his voice.

“You think arguments alone will work?” added the other. “That we can achieve our goals by playing fair? Rank idealism. Such naivety will get us absolutely nowhere. Any government must resort to extreme measures sometimes—even to foul play. If you don’t understand that, we clearly misjudged you. Who’d have guessed you were so innocent?”

“Either way, assassinating the king is sure to bring about your own destruction—that much is true. I’ve heard enough now. Stand aside. I’m leaving.”

A pause. “I’m afraid you’re not.”

There was something unsettling about the tone of those words. A chill ran through me as I realized they weren’t about to silently back down. That very instant, I heard a sharp, breathless groan.

“What...are you...?”

A heavy thud followed.

What just happened? What did they do!? Did he just fall to the ground? Did they just...? No... No, surely not...

“It really is a shame. We had such high hopes for you.”

“Was this ultimately no more than a diversion for you? A pampered child’s playtime? We thought you’d be useful because of your power to inspire people, but if you’re so unwilling to see reason, you’re of no value after all.”

“We’ll take over at this point. We have other promising collaborators as well, you see. The royal family can meet you on the other side. You’ll be going there first.”

The pair started walking. A second later, I heard them open the door, then close it. Their footsteps disappeared into the distance and the room fell silent.

I stayed behind the curtain, trembling where I stood. Even though I hadn’t seen it, I could vividly imagine what had just occurred. A man had been killed right next to me. I’d just heard his final moments. If I stepped out from my hiding place, I was certain to see a corpse lying on the floor. I had to hurry up and warn everyone about the danger, but my body wouldn’t listen to me. Frozen with fear, I couldn’t move from the spot.

What am I doing? This is no time to be scared. I have to go, right now! Something terrible is about to happen to His Highness and his whole family! To Julianne! Come on... Move... Move...!

“Hello?” said a faint voice.

I jumped. Just as I thought I was alone except for a dead body, a voice took me by surprise.

“There’s someone here...isn’t there? You can...come out now. It’s all right...”

A corpse is speaking! Wait, no—he’s still alive! And he noticed me here!?

This was so astounding that it shook me out of my petrification and I came out from behind the curtain. As expected, a man was lying nearby on the ground with a handsome face and a neatly trimmed goatee. His reddish brown hair was disheveled and he was taking pained, shallow breaths.

I fell to my knees beside him. “Marquess!”

“I don’t know who you are,” he groaned, “but...you heard it all, didn’t you?” Marquess Rafale’s eyes looked up at me. Despite his look of anguish, he didn’t beg for aid. Instead he said, “Please, you must spread the word. Hurry. Make sure the royal family...escape...from the... Hngh!”

His words gave way to moans. From below the hand he held pressed to his abdomen, a red stream was steadily flowing. If I simply abandoned him, he really would die before too long. I couldn’t just leave him there.

But I have no idea how to stop bleeding from the abdomen. I know if it’s an arm or leg you can bind it, but what are you supposed to do in this case!?

“Go... Quickly...!”

His forehead drenched with cold sweat, the marquess urged me to leave. Forcing my quivering legs into action, I stood. *I mustn’t lose my head. To save His Majesty and everyone with him, and even to save the marquess, I have to leave and inform someone.*

As soon as I started toward the door, my restrictive dress proved an obstacle again. *Honestly, now is NOT the time!*

I looked around, then went over to the desk and opened every drawer in turn. *There!* Nestled among the other stationery was a pair of scissors. They were small, meant to be used on paper, but they were capable of cutting, and that was what mattered. I picked them up and stuck them through the fabric of my skirt. Grateful that it was thin, summery fabric, I successfully tore open a hole.

From there I snipped my way downwards. The scissors didn't cut as effortlessly as a pair designed for sewing would have done, so to a great extent I just applied force and ripped the fabric in two.

Now I had a wide slit starting just above the knee that allowed me to move my legs properly. My underthings were on full display, but I couldn't worry about that. I finished by cutting off the train to make myself as agile as possible, then I ran to the door.

"Hold on! I'll call you a doctor right away! I definitely won't let you or the king die!"

Saying nothing to him but that, I ran. *Does the marquess even have enough strength left to take in my words? I wonder how long he'll be able to endure? I'll have to summon help as quickly as I possibly can.*

I barreled along the empty corridor at a breakneck pace until I heard voices. For the briefest of moments, I was overjoyed. I rushed toward their source, hoping they belonged to palace staff.

When I turned the corner, my face fell.

"Who are you?" said a member of the group.

They had noticed my arrival and turned to look. I stepped back. The huddle of five or six people included two faces I remembered well. They were the pair always seen in Marquess Rafale's company. Those fiendish criminals had stabbed the marquess, then not even fled the scene. They were standing there having a casual chat.

"Where did this wench come from?"

"Did she see? We have to deal with her."

The men started moving toward me. In a flash, I turned on my heel. *What am I going to do? If I try running, they'll catch me straight away. I haven't seen any staircases nearby, and there's no one else around. Normally the royal guards would be patrolling even inside the building, but there's no one here. Wait... Patrolling. That's it!*

I tried the closest doors one after another. When I found an unlocked room, I

darted inside, charged toward the window and flung it open. *There have to be royal guards patrolling outside. Someone must be within earshot.*

“Someone! Anyone! Come quick!” I yelled. “Help! A man is dying! Somebody, please!”

Over and over I screamed, until my throat was raw. *There’s no way that went unnoticed. I’ll definitely have attracted some attention. Maybe these scoundrels will even decide it’s too risky and run away.*

“Please! Somebody help!” I continued.

“Marielle!” called a voice from below.

When I sought out the one it belonged to, his blond hair, shining in the sunlight, caught my eye. Among the knights rushing over was the one I’d most hoped would come. I almost cried.

“Lord Simeon!”

“Marielle, what in the—”

Before he could finish, my hair was grabbed from behind. I was dragged away from the window with incredible force. With my throat bent backwards, I let out a scream.

“Curse you, wench!”

The man pulled me to the ground and sat astride me. In his hand he gripped a knife. The blade still held traces of blood. The weapon that had stabbed Marquess Rafale was now being wielded against me.

“Quick, the royal guards are coming! We have to make our escape!”

“If we don’t silence her too, she’ll start talking.”

“No!” I uttered, but with a fully grown man sitting on me, the weight made it hurt to breathe. Despite the feeling of being crushed, I used what strength I had to grasp his arms and try to push him away. He shook me off like it was nothing—and in the same instant, a shock ran through my left arm. At first it felt white hot, then half a second later came the pain. In the chaos of our struggle, the knife had struck me.

I didn't know how deeply I'd been cut, but when I saw the blood flowing, I began to feel faint. Then the knife descended toward me again, and I hunched up, unable to even scream.

The subsequent events seemed to happen oddly slowly. The man and his weapon were suddenly sent flying. After kicking him, the military boots came to stand beside me. Still on the ground and facing up, I looked at my savior. Lord Simeon gazed down, his face consumed by a mixture of shock and anger.

"You're...that upstart royal guard..."

Though appearing to be in a lot of pain, the man stood and tried to escape in a mad panic. Lord Simeon caught up at lightning speed. Dodging the swinging blade without any difficulty, he subdued the man in seconds.

"You *dare* lay a finger on Marielle?"

Growling deeply like a beast, Lord Simeon flung the man to the ground with tremendous strength. The ground shook so hard that I could feel it. That was enough to stop the man from moving any longer. The shock had probably broken several bones.



Even so, Lord Simeon did not stop. His hand moved to his hip and smoothly slid the saber out of its scabbard. Watching him wield the blade, the breath caught in my throat. This was no mere threat. Murderous intent visibly enveloped his entire body. Reflexively I tried to leap up, but the tiniest movement made me groan as intense pain shot through me.

The saber plunged toward the collapsed man. All I could manage was a raspy voice akin to a scream. “No... Don’t... You can’t!”

Just as I was about to close my eyes in fear, the blade stopped a hair’s breadth away from the man’s nose.

What little rationality was left in Lord Simeon just barely restrained his violent emotions. He gritted his teeth and pulled back the saber, his hands shaking. Conflicted, he didn’t return it to its scabbard straight away. He took a ragged series of deep breaths. Then, at last, he kicked the man one more time to knock him out before managing to somewhat compose himself.

A deadpan voice cut through the tense air. “Vice Captain, are you some sort of ape?” I looked at the window, where Alain was mysteriously hanging from the window ledge. “I’m impressed that you climbed up so quickly.”

“If your training has been insufficient, I’ll gladly make you do all the drills you require.”

“Hah. No thank you, sir.”

Alain’s cheery voice returned Lord Simeon to his usual demeanor. Alain had probably seen the whole thing and was acting purposefully. He looked at me with a wry smile. *Thank you, Alain. I’m glad Lord Simeon has such a dependable aide.*

He pulled himself up and over the window ledge. *Both he and Lord Simeon must have climbed up the outside wall. Did they use the window frames and buttresses as handholds? That really is like an ape. The knights are all gorillas underneath, aren’t they!*

“Marielle!”

Lord Simeon rushed back to my side and helped me up. His eyebrows,

previously furrowed with rage, had already softened. Now his face held nothing but worry. Apparently unconcerned about getting blood on himself, he pressed his hand against the wound.

“Lieutenant, stop the bleeding.” He removed a strap from his uniform.

“Yes, sir.”

Alain took the strap and tied it around my arm so tightly that it hurt. It was actually more painful than the wound itself. Of course, the wound hurt a great deal as well—even looking at it was frightening—but it wasn’t life-threatening, I was sure.

Lord Simeon drew his cheek close to mine and repeated words of encouragement. “Don’t worry, it’ll be all right. The cut’s not too deep. We’ll have it treated right away.”

As his large body embraced me, the feeling of being safe and protected made me happier than anything. I knew that with him there, I would be fine now. However, there were more important matters to attend to.

“Are you hurt anywhere else? Your back? Your legs? Did you hit your head?”

“I’m quite all right. There’s someone much more badly injured who needs attention. Marquess Rafale was stabbed. Please, he’s at death’s door. He needs help urgently.”

“Marquess Rafale? What on earth happened? Where is he?”

“He’s in a room very nearby. Just a little further along. Also, did the royal family go to the old chapel?”

“Yes. How do you know that?”

“Those awful men were talking about it. They contrived it so the venue would be changed. It’s a trap. It’s all so they can assassinate His Majesty and everyone who’s with him. You have to get them out of there right now. If you delay for even a minute, they’ll be surrounded by flames and left unable to escape.”

Lord Simeon’s face once again tensed into a chilling grimace. Alain turned pale as well.

“You’re absolutely certain?”

“Without a shadow of a doubt. It’s a plot by the reformist faction. Marquess Rafale opposed it and tried to stop them, so they stabbed him. There’s no time to lose! They said they’d installed a mechanism with gunpowder and oil. Once enough time has passed, a fire will break out on its own. The stairs will be blocked and no one will be able to escape. Please, get them out, quickly.”

Before I had even finished talking, Lord Simeon lifted me into his arms and stood. When he went to the door, more of his subordinates arrived at the same moment, having run through the inside of the building.

“Vice Captain, we found several men behaving suspiciously.”

The escaping conspirators had been found and captured already. Still carrying me, Lord Simeon went out into the corridor and issued orders.

“Marquess Rafale is lying injured in a room nearby. It’s apparently quite serious. Find him urgently and tend to him. Second Lieutenant Mirbeau, arrest this man.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, Vice Captain, wait a moment!” One of the subordinates produced a scarf and ran over to us. “Please, take this! It’s better than nothing, hopefully.”

“Indeed. Thank you.”

He wrapped the scarf around my injured arm. With the wound still fully exposed, even the light breeze had made it sting. Now that it was covered, I felt as though the pain had dimmed just a little.

Lord Simeon’s white uniform was stained with my blood. A trivial notion popped into my head: *That might never wash out.* That hardly mattered, but in all the turmoil, my thoughts were in disarray. All sorts of notions began to flash through my mind. I forgot each one as soon as it arose, making my anxiety and restlessness grow ever more intense. *Will Julianne and the others be all right? The fire hasn’t started yet, has it? Please, somehow, let us not be too late.*

“Put your arms around me. I’m going to run.”

“All right.”

Running at a speed you wouldn’t expect from someone carrying another

person, Lord Simeon made for the stairs, with Alain chasing after. The shaking agitated my wound. It hurt so much that I thought my arm might fall off, ridiculous as the idea was. I'd never felt such agony in all my life. From where I'd been cut, the pain radiated along my whole arm and up to my shoulder. I found myself straining to bear it, gritting my teeth so hard it gave me a headache. My breathing became shallow as well. I wanted to sob, *It hurts, it hurts, it hurts. Help me.*

But I can endure this. I have to. Compared to what Marquess Rafale is going through, it's barely a scratch. Despite suffering to a degree this can't even compare to, he didn't beg for aid for himself, but for His Majesty and the rest of the royal family. He asked me to make sure everyone knew about all the lives at risk. I can't be defeated by this level of pain after he fought so valiantly while at death's door. I'm fine. This isn't a deadly wound. I can withstand this. It's all I have to do. I can manage it. I can!

The commotion inevitably led the staff members still inside the main palace building to take notice and come to look. Outside, the number of people crowding around nearby had grown larger as well. After we sped out of the building, a voice I knew well flagged us down.

"Simeon! And...Marielle, you're covered in blood! What happened!?"

"Adrien, you're just in time. Take Marielle to the infirmary."

Lord Simeon passed me over to his brother, who had cut through the crowd to reach us.

"The infirmary? Where's that?"

"Ask one of the servants! Marielle, I'm sorry to leave you."

"Forget about me. You have to go and—"

Interrupting my reply, a clamor began to spread from some way in the distance. Screams and cries of alarm erupted from the mass of people. Everyone looked in the same direction, some of them pointing.

Lord Simeon, Alain, Lord Adrien, and I could all see it as well. Across the grounds from the main palace, beyond several other buildings, smoke was rising. A dense pillar, pitch black, stretched into the air.

“Fire!” shouted someone, and the tumult magnified at once.

I panted hard. My chest hurt. The pain in my arm no longer registered at all.
How can this be? No. This can't be happening. Oh, God.

We hadn't made it in time. The old chapel was already engulfed in flame.

Chapter Fourteen

The royal guards set off running all at once. The palace staff sprang into action as well, barking instructions for putting out the fire. Before I knew it, Lord Simeon was nowhere to be seen.

As he carried me, Lord Adrien fought against the flow of the crowd and began to look for the infirmary.

“Stop fidgeting. You’re injured.”

“Julianne... His Highness... Princess Henriette... They’re all in there!”

“Simeon’s taking care of it! You need medical care! That comes first!”

After asking around, we finally found it. However, the room was being manned only by a few housemaids, with no doctor in sight.

“We heard a fire had broken out, so the doctor has gone to help. He also took all the medicine and supplies with him so he can treat any injuries as soon as possible.”

This explanation made Lord Adrien tut in frustration. “Ugh! He went the other way!?”

The housemaids looked at me, covered in blood as he held me in his arms, with helpless and tearful expressions. “Would you like to wait here?” one of them ventured. “Or would you rather leave and find a doctor elsewhere?”

Lord Adrien pondered what to do. If we waited, it would likely be a long time before the doctor came back. Seeking a doctor outside the palace would probably be quicker, but I didn’t want to get too far away.

“Can we head toward the old chapel?” I suggested weakly. “I’ll probably be treated more quickly there, and we can see what’s going on with the fire.”

He looked down at me. In the throes of pain, I was dripping with cold sweat, and my head was swimming as well. The physical and mental distress were driving me to the brink.

“Maybe you’re right,” he concluded after a moment. My condition must have convinced him that it was better for me to be treated as quickly as possible. He lifted me up again and began making his way to the northern gardens.

The pandemonium outside had grown even wilder. Struggling through the waves of panicked people, we proceeded northward. Between the buildings I could see glimpses of the gardens and the battery, and then the old chapel loomed, surrounded by flames and black smoke.

“Oh no...”

Just as the scheming men had said, the neighboring building had collapsed onto the chapel’s entrance staircase. The rubble covering the stairs was also aflame. Though a few figures had managed to emerge from the burning chapel, there was nowhere they could go.

“Julianne!”

I could see people standing there paralyzed with fear. They were trapped between flames in front and behind, and it was plain to see that escape was a hopeless prospect.

Amid the utter chaos on the ground, many people were rushing about, making an effort to put out the fire.

“Water! We need water!”

“Bring the pumps!”

Hand-operated pumps were brought over, but the fire was at the top of a long staircase, so it was clear at a glance that the water wouldn’t reach.

This meant there was no choice but to carry water to the fire by hand. Men and women alike joined forces to deliver as much water as they could manage.

Finding the doctor among the mayhem would not be easy. Lord Adrien put me down in a spot away from the bulk of the crowd.

“I’ll go and find him. You wait here. I’ll be back soon, so hold on until then.”

With this steadfast promise, he turned and left. I watched his golden brown hair quickly disappear into the mass of people.

I leaned against a tree and looked up at the old chapel. It was maddening that I could do nothing to help while Julianne and the entire royal family were about to die right before my eyes. I didn't want to just sit there gasping in pain and unable to act.

Tears of shame and frustration welled in my eyes, but I wiped them away with my uninjured right hand. There was no use crying. If I had time to lament, I had to think about what I *could* do.

The number of helping hands was rapidly increasing. Not only royal guards and palace staff were lending assistance, but ever more of the guests who had come to attend the festivities. There appeared to be plenty of support. Buckets were passed from person to person without a moment's delay. I harbored some hope that they might be able to stop the fire after all, but I could also see even from here that the old chapel wouldn't hold out too long before collapsing. If it did, those at the top of the stairs would be gravely injured.

The rubble is the real problem. It's too big an obstacle. The fire's barely been taken care of at all, and it's too big for anyone to cross.

After a pause, I suddenly shifted my gaze. My eyes found the battery not far from the old chapel. This was a rather tall building as well—and outfitted with a cannon. *It's only used to fire salutes during ceremonies. It usually just makes a loud noise rather than firing properly, but...if it was loaded with live ammunition, it would still work, wouldn't it?*

I wondered if that was really possible. If such a plan could actually succeed.

Perhaps, I thought, it would simply make the situation even worse. The impact would set a fire blazing too, of course. Maybe it would only intensify the flames. Worse, it might even blow the ones waiting for rescue sky high.

Still, it was an idea.

I pressed my right hand against the tree for support and stood up. Staggering, I set out toward the old chapel.

There's no point in me debating whether it's realistic or not. I have no way of knowing, so I'll have to ask someone who does.

The royal guards on the ground were working flat out to explore other means

of rescue.

“More! Bring more! Anything will do, so grab whatever you can find!”

“Aren’t there any bigger blankets? What about curtains? Get those!”

They were spreading out soft materials to see if they might be able to break the trapped people’s fall with them. Mattresses were also being brought from the main palace building and piled up nearby. Ladders had been leaned against the staircase, but they only reached halfway, so they were testing whether it was possible to clamber up from that point.

I darted my head about to look for Lord Simeon. He had to be issuing orders somewhere nearby.

When I approached a knight to ask, the man rebuffed me. “Don’t come any nearer! Go back the other way, please!”

I was so close to the fire now that I could feel the heat on my skin. *If it’s so intense where I’m standing, how hot must it be for the ones up there? Even without being hit directly by the flames or the rubble, the heat alone could burn you to death.*

“Go back, I said!”

“Where’s Lord Simeon? I have to tell him something!”

“The Vice Captain is over there!”

The place he pointed to was quite far away. Going over there and starting my search anew would waste too much time.

With a gesture toward the battery, I asked the guard in front of me. “The cannon—could it fire if loaded with live ammunition? Could it be used to blast away the debris on the stairs?”

He shook his head in bewilderment. “What!? I... I don’t know. I’m sure it can fire, but...I don’t know if that would work. Maybe.”

“Based on the position of the battery, the angle shouldn’t be a problem. It wouldn’t have to be aimed outward, so there’s no real risk of causing damage outside of the palace grounds. It’s just a question of the range that would be caught in the impact. Is it possible to blow away the rubble without harming the

people trapped at the top?”

He shook his head and whimpered in confusion. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything about that.”

I suppose there really is no choice but to ask Lord Simeon.

No sooner did I have that thought than a hand wrapped itself around me from behind. “Just as Marielle says, we’re going to blast away the debris. Tell everyone to evacuate the area.”

Lord Simeon drew me close to him and gave the order. Then, without his usual lecture about why I shouldn’t be there, he lifted me up.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. “I had to come and tell you. I *had* to.”

“It’s a fine idea. I just hit upon it myself, in fact. We’re making the preparations now.”

With me in his arms, Lord Simeon rushed toward the battery. As he had said, the ammunition had been brought and the cannon was being loaded.

He ran up into the battery and put me down nearby.

“It was inspected beforehand, yes?” Lord Simeon asked his aide.

“Yes,” Alain replied. “Maintenance was carried out for the ceremony and no problems were found.”

Beside us, a royal guard held up flags to send signals to the old chapel. He was no doubt explaining this plan. There were guards trapped at the top as well who would understand the code.

“Will it work?” I asked.

“It’s all or nothing, you might say. We won’t aim directly for the stairs, but slightly higher.”

The people attempting to put out the fire were made to temporarily retreat. Loading was completed and the cannon was aimed roughly in the right direction. Then the angle was adjusted, and finally Lord Simeon himself lined up the sights. I could see movement over by the chapel as well; the ones directing the crowd were probably His Highness and the Captain. They seemed to be

withdrawing from the rubble as far they could to avoid being caught in the blast.

“I hope the debris doesn’t fly toward them.”

“It will, in all likelihood. If luck’s not on our side, they might die.”

“What!?”

Hearing him state this so straightforwardly, my head twisted to look at Lord Simeon again. What was the point in firing the cannon to save them if it ended up killing them instead!?

He bent down and observed the target from the perspective of the cannon. Though he was probably apprehensive underneath, he carefully aligned the sights without any sign of nerves at all.

“Please don’t scare us like that,” said Alain.

“It’s the truth. Unless we attempt this, we won’t be able to save them all regardless. We’ve no other choice now. If necessary, we’ll have to rely on the Captain and our men to forfeit their lives.”

These cold words prompted me to look at the chapel again. Some people were lying face down on the ground, and the knights were covering them with their own bodies, guarding against damage the only way they could. Though the sight of them protecting their masters even with their lives was a noble one, I didn’t want them to die to save the royal family. Nor was there any guarantee that this would be enough.

Despite the odds, I desperately hoped they would get out safely. There was nothing I could do now but pray with all my might.

“It’s time. Give the signal!”

“Yes, sir!”

The flags were waved again. Lord Simeon grabbed the cord attached to the back of the cannon.

Everyone held their breath and waited.

Then Lord Simeon pulled forcefully. The *bang* reverberated through my whole

body. This was a bigger shock than I'd expected. It shook not only my eardrums, but every inch of me. Fire and smoke spewed from the cannon's mouth, accompanied by a thin whistling noise.

Straight afterward, an explosion occurred on the staircase. I forgot all about the pain in my arm and leaned forward. The cannonball had hit the burning debris. So much smoke and dust rose up that I couldn't see what had happened. *What happened? Did it work? Is everyone safe?*

After several interminable seconds, the smoke began to dissipate at last. The staircase was still a mess of debris, just as it had been before. However, the pile of rubble was no longer so high that it was impossible to climb over. In fact, it was significantly more level. Heaps of fallen debris lined the ground below.

We all watched with bated breath to see what had happened to the people above.

A single man rose up. Cheers erupted on the ground.

It was His Majesty the King. There was no doubting it—he was unmistakable even at this distance. That man was the king. The king was safe!

After him, more and more people got to their feet. They were all safe. The royal family stood tall, as did the duke and duchess. Julianne and Prince Severin nestled close to one another. All of them were able to stand on their own two feet.

None of the royals guards appeared to be too injured to move either. Each of them stood up without assistance as well. Lord Simeon had fired the cannonball so perfectly that it not only cleared the obstruction, but also reduced the human impact to the bare minimum.

The royal guards here in the battery cried out in joy as well.

"It worked!"

"Hooray!"

Lord Simeon retained his stern expression and immediately directed the next course of action. "Now we need to put out the remaining fire and provide rescue. Hurry!"

Alain and the other knights leapt into action and ran down from the battery. On the ground, helpers began running up the chapel staircase again.

His Majesty and the others no longer stood and waited, however. They stepped forward to try crossing over the debris. The bucket relay started up again, pouring water on the still smoldering flames. The royal guards lent their arms to the royals to help them over; the ladies were lifted up and carried across. All of them made it past the rubble and started down the stairs.

As soon as they were all clear, the chapel behind them finally collapsed with a thunderous roar. It was a narrow escape. The bell tower fell exactly where they had just been standing. A thunderous *crash* resounded as it hit the ground. Had the escape been delayed even slightly, they'd have been crushed. No one would have survived.

My body grew weak. *That was scary. Terrifying, even. I thought they were all going to die. I thought I'd never see Julianne or His Highness ever again. I was so afraid.*

"Thank goodness," I murmured.

Tears began to flow. In my overwhelming relief, I collapsed to the floor, unable to stand at all. Lord Simeon lifted me up again, having apparently never intended to make me walk in the first place.

"Lord Simeon... You were incredible. You hit your mark exactly and only blasted away the rubble. It turns out you're not only skilled at firing guns, but cannons, too. What an incredible hero. I knew you'd rise to the occasion, Lord Simeon. You're simply the best. I love you so much!"

Now that it had sunk in that everything was fine, tremendous joy welled up in me. Unable to contain it, I wrapped my arms around Lord Simeon's neck and let my excitement flow forth. I didn't care what anyone around us thought. This emotion was too overwhelming to contain. *I'm happy. I'm so, so happy. I can't simply stay quiet.*

"I'm not especially well trained in firing a cannon," he replied. "I can't say that I had all that much confidence."

Though he remained composed, Lord Simeon, too, was surely filled with relief

and joy. His reply held a hint of a laugh. “If the royal guards found themselves engaged in cannon warfare, it would imply that the enemy had advanced all the way to the palace. That’s inconceivable in modern-day Lagrange, so our training is rather basic. We learn how to fire it and not much more, then we only put it into action to fire salutes.”

“But...you...”

I lifted my head and gazed up at the face close to mine. The light blue eyes behind his glasses held a trace of a wicked smile.

“My plan involved sacrificing the Captain and the other men. I must say, I’m awfully relieved to have dealt with the matter without becoming known as the knight who killed his superior officer.”

“You...are joking, aren’t you?”

Though I tried to smile, I couldn’t quite manage it. Even I could tell how strained my expression was. Rather than answering my question, he evaded it with a simple “Perhaps.”

He can’t be serious. Even if it was a desperate gamble, without some measure of confidence he wouldn’t have been able to do it, would he? He must have committed to it based on some belief that it would succeed. There’s no way he was actually planning to sacrifice the lives of his boss and subordinates...was there?

From his face alone, I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not.

That look in his eye—as though he’s successfully carried out an evil scheme! My word. Despite the circumstances, I can’t help finding him so dashing. Wait, this is not the time to be fangirling! Though I’m certain if there really had been lives lost, he wouldn’t be smiling.

In the end, I was still deeply in love with my husband’s brutal side. There was no denying it. This was part of what made him who he was. *I adore your mercilessness, Lord Simeon.*

Also, at the end of the day, any military officer worth his salt should have been prepared to lay his life on the line, one would assume. Had the situation been reversed, Lord Simeon wouldn’t have hesitated to sacrifice his own life.

That was the kind of man I had married. As his wife, I had to be prepared as well. One day, my husband might follow his master to the grave. If that day ever came, I hoped I could accept it without falling to pieces.

It was something I understood in theory, but I definitely didn't want it to happen in reality. Marquess Rafale was right: a battle for power filled with bloodshed would only lead to further sorrow. It couldn't ever bring about the new era he wished for. A war of words was enough. The purpose of a government is to help its people to live in peace and happiness, so that was only fitting.

I'd almost forgotten about Marquess Rafale. I hope he was saved in time as well.

When I looked around, all thought of holding ceremonies seemed to have disappeared. Everyone was too exhausted and sweat-drenched.

I wonder what will happen now? I barely have the energy to think about it.

When she reached the base of the stairs, Julianne saw me there. "Marielle!"

I asked Lord Simeon to put me down. I didn't want to be burdening him when he still had so much to do.

"Julianne, are you all right? You're not injured?"

"I can hardly believe you're worried about *me*! Why are you covered in blood? Why is your dress torn to shreds? What in the world happened to you!?"

As she spoke, she left His Highness behind and ran over to me. The abandoned prince looked sullen for a moment, but he quickly pulled himself together and followed. "Should you be up and about? I daresay you belong in the infirmary!"

"Your Highness, I'm far more concerned about you and your family. Are none of you injured?"

"As far as I can gather, you're the one most grievously injured. Nothing overly serious on our side."

Even with his face stained with soot, his voice was as full of life as ever. He remained unruffled. Those following them down seemed completely fine as

well. I once again felt my knees give out beneath me from the sheer relief.

“Simeon, you unforgivable wretch!” cried Captain Poisson. His hair was rather singed and he was caked with soot from top to bottom. With a resentful tone, he bore down on Lord Simeon. “Even tough decisions have a limit, damn you! How *dare* you do such a thing!”

“My apologies. I simply couldn’t come up with any practical alternative. For my own reference, I would gladly receive instruction on how to behave if the same situation arises again.”

In a manner that I’d expect of Lord Simeon himself, the Captain firmly put his hands around Lord Simeon’s neck and strangled him. “You’re not half as funny as you think you are! Though I already knew that.”

Even as Captain Poisson started grinding his fists painfully against Lord Simeon’s head, my husband didn’t protest. He simply furrowed his brow and let it happen.

Behind them, some chuckling figures approached. His Majesty and Duke Silvestre were just as caked in soot as the rest. Though I didn’t say anything, I was struck by the absurd extent to which they’d lost their air of dignity. This was the only time I had ever seen the duke and not been scared of him.

He turned his gray eyes on me. “What a state you’re in,” he said in an almost admiring tone.

Indeed, I probably shouldn’t be judging anyone else when I’m looking the worst of all. My dress was in tatters, my arm was covered in blood, and my hair, which Joanna had styled so neatly, had come undone and was miserably disheveled.

I started to feel faint. *Perhaps I’ve lost too much blood. Still, it’s enough now. The danger is averted, and there’s nothing else I can do...even if I am still curious about Marquess Rafale’s condition.*

“Julianne,” I began feebly.

“What is it? You look awfully pale. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Did you finish the engagement ceremony?”

This was supposed to be my friend's special day, so it was horrible that it had ended up like this. I at least wanted to know if they'd successfully gotten engaged.

She exchanged a look with His Highness and smiled gently. "See for yourself."

The hand she presented wore a brand new ring. The engagement ring from His Highness had a reserved but charming design that suited her very well. However, for reasons I couldn't discern, the jewel was blue. Julianne's birthstone was opal, but this was clearly a sapphire. There was no rule that it *had* to be her birthstone, but it was puzzling nonetheless.

"Now that I think about it, His Highness's birthday is in September, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is," he confirmed.

I paused. "Did you give her a ring based on your *own* birthstone?"

Rather than blushing and shying away from my gaze, he unashamedly put an arm around Julianne's shoulder and pulled her closer. "If Julianne wishes it, I'll gladly buy her opal or any other jewel she wants. However, for an engagement ring, this was the one and only option. That's how close I want to be with her. I wish for her to truly be my other half."

Julianne's cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

Words failed me. My eyes narrowed. *Why do I feel so uncomfortable? It's as though he's going out of his way to sound mushy and sentimental about her. I never thought the day would come when His Highness, he of legendary patheticness, would be the one flaunting his mushy idea of romance. Suddenly I understand how he must have felt around me and Lord Simeon all this time. This has got to be his revenge. I can see the words "It serves you right" all over his face.*

"Lord Simeon! I want you to buy me a ruby ring soon!"

"What's that all of a sudden!?"

That instant, all the faces around me started to spin. Sound grew more distant, and my pain and exhaustion faded as well. I had reached my limit. Peacefully, I closed my eyes.

While deciding firmly that I'd *have* to ensure my husband gave me a ring with his birthstone, I gave in at last and let awareness slip away.

Chapter Fifteen

When the wider populace of Sans-Terre heard the loud cannon shot that had drawn this awful incident to a close, they apparently assumed it was the salute marking the end of the ceremony. They felt it was a tad early, perhaps, but otherwise it seemed normal. So the next day's headlines came as rather a shock. The truth, in combination with the details of the reformist faction's assassination plot, caused quite a stir across the city.

"Chouchou. Chouchou. Over here!"

I dangled some chicken—her favorite—in front of the cat, who was sulking in her specially made bed. She'd grown rather disgruntled due to my long absence. Even after returning home, I'd been too busy to pay her much attention—and after that, my injury had forced me to shut her out of the bedroom for a while. Now she firmly ignored me even when I presented her with a treat. *Did she discover that I was cheating on her with a dog? The scent should be long since gone, but maybe she has her ways of knowing.*

She turned up her nose no matter how many times I called her name, so I gave up and set the plate down on the floor in front of her bed. Being too persistent would only annoy her further, so there was no choice but to let her come to the food herself. After all, she was only pretending to ignore me; in truth, she was intensely interested in my reactions.

I sat down on a chair and opened a newspaper. Since I couldn't go out right now, and writing was also forbidden, the newspapers bought for me by a servant were my greatest source of excitement. While I was reading, Lord Simeon entered the room.

"Marielle, didn't I tell you not to get up?" Though it was still morning, he was wearing casual civilian clothing. However, the reason was not that he hadn't gone to work yet or that he had a night shift. "You should get back into bed."

"Lying down all day makes my head hurt. It's just a little cut on my arm. There's no need to fuss over it so much."

“Have you entirely forgotten the fever you developed after you collapsed?”

“Don’t be so ridiculous. I remember every detail! Now I’ll be able to depict sickbed scenes with perfect accuracy!”

“That’s not what I’m referring to. After an incident like that, you shouldn’t be up and about.”

He came over to my side and lifted the newspaper out of my hands. This was not a high-class broadsheet read by fine ladies and gentlemen, but a tabloid gossip rag. When he realized this, he screwed up his handsome face. “Reading this drivel again?”

“The way they embellish the stories is incredible! It’s as entertaining as any work of drama. They make all sorts of inventive claims. Julianne and His Highness were so determined to push ahead with their romance that they ran from the people trying to tear them apart because of their class difference and fought them off with a cannon. Or Julianne was abducted by a man who’d fallen in love with her, and he trapped her in the old chapel. How can you help but laugh?”

“I can hardly think of anything that’s less of a laughing matter.”

Exasperated, Lord Simeon put the newspaper down on the table. It joined a heap of others whose reporting ranged from the accurate to the absurd. However, faithfully reproduced in all of them was the news His Highness and Julianne were now engaged.

The engagement had been made public in Lagrange and across the world. By now, there was no one left who wasn’t aware of it. They were receiving congratulations from all and sundry, to the point that responding to it all had apparently become quite time-consuming. The Sorels had once more begun boasting about their daughter, but Julianne was now the adopted daughter of Duke and Duchess Silvestre. The preparations for her marriage into the royal family were all being handled by them, so her birth family didn’t have to do anything in particular. This, too, was widely known, so the people in society greeted the Sorels’ bombast with strained smiles and took no real notice of it.

Julianne was worried that her absence would cause her family to slide even closer to ruin. It was certainly too soon for Isidore to take charge of restraining

their headstrong parents. Clearly, a heavy hand was needed, so His Highness dispatched an overseer to House Sorel. Since this wasn't a servant working for the Sorels, but a staff member dispatched by the crown prince himself, the overseer was able to apply firm pressure without being distracted by the baron and baroness's reactions. Objecting would equate to disobeying the royal family, so the Sorels had no choice but to do whatever they were told. Their income was enough to live a comfortable enough life if they only refrained from squandering it all, so it sounded as though this would be just what the doctor ordered.

This thoughtfulness from His Highness allowed Julianne to feel at ease as she worked hard with the duke and duchess to prepare for the marriage. I wanted to pay her a quick visit to show moral support, but I was still confined to my home. My fever had long since subsided and my wound barely even hurt anymore, so I could move around perfectly comfortably, but my overprotective husband just wouldn't allow it.

"If I let you do what you like, your wound will worsen again. Could you please behave at least until the stitches are removed?"

His long finger gently traced along the bandage wrapped around my left arm. The wound, positioned slightly above my wrist, was fortunately unlikely to have any long-term repercussions, but it had required several stitches. It was also likely to leave a scar, of course. The doctor had said the scar would fade before too long, and it could easily be hidden by gloves, so I wasn't too worried about it. However, Lord Simeon was extremely concerned about the fact that I'd been wounded, and I couldn't do much to counter his overprotective lectures, even if they did go beyond the strictly necessary.

"Marquess Rafale was injured far more seriously. How's his condition? Did the messenger from the Order say anything about him?"

A knight had arrived a short while ago, whom Lord Simeon had gone to talk to. I was intrigued about what they had discussed and how things had progressed since our last update.

"He's recovering well. It sounds as though he was very lucky. If he'd been stabbed even slightly higher, he'd have been beyond saving." In a mutter to

himself, he added, “Stubborn devil.”

A chuckle escaped my lips. “I think the country needs a man like him. He’s trying to change the political landscape, but he’s determined to do it the right way, not through unscrupulous means. His opinions are worth having on the table, aren’t they?”

The system that had endured all this time, with a government ruled by a king, probably couldn’t continue unchanged forever. Prince Severin had said so as well. He’d even suggested that a new era might arrive as early as his generation. The current king, too, was apparently of the view that if it was what the country needed, he’d accept it. However, a sudden, dramatic change would be like overly strong medicine: there would be side effects. Our relationships with other countries had to be considered as well. There was no way that a coup could avoid throwing our internal and external politics into turmoil. Thus His Majesty apparently wished to do what he could to ensure the country changed as slowly and naturally as possible.

Julianne had never had any interest in power and influence. Even if His Highness stepped down, she would surely be just as happy to live her life with him.

“I can’t say I disagree with all of the reformist faction’s arguments,” Lord Simeon replied. “There are aspects that I understand and sympathize with. However, the idea of a government that’s open to participation from everyone, regardless of status, will face strong opposition from the nobility. I don’t think Marquess Rafale’s goal will be an easy one to achieve.”

His words were somewhat cold and blunt. I didn’t have the impression that he saw Marquess Rafale as an enemy, but neither did he see him in an overly favorable light.

“Lord Simeon, do you consider yourself someone who opposes a change to the current system?”

“I’ve sworn fealty to the royal family, so I can’t actively endorse such a change. All I can do is support His Highness’s decisions and lend him my aid. That being said, the common people are growing ever more wealthy and influential. The nobility won’t be able to sit on their high horses forever, I’m

sure. Signs of change are occurring already, and there might even come a time when the concept of nobility disappears altogether. If I could no longer offer you the security of being an earl's wife, how would you feel?"

I cocked my head slightly at the question. *I can hardly believe he'd bother asking me a thing like that. Does he truly not know the answer by now?*

He continued, "Suppose we have no status or fortune anymore, and we have to part with this manor and live in a cramped apartment building, barely scraping by. What would you do in that situation?"

"Let me see."

I tried to picture the scene. This sort of setting appeared frequently when the main character was a young lady who'd lost her fortune. This was always a rags-to-riches story, however, where she escaped from that life in the end. What if the life of poverty was the end point, instead?

"It sounds like fun," I said at last.

Imagining it sent a thrill running through me. *All of a sudden I feel such an urge to write! I'm fangirling already, and it's stimulating my creative juices!*

"It would mean living in close quarters with you. I'd bake bread every day. I'd do my best to learn how to make other things, too. I'd wash your clothes and mend anything that got torn and frayed. Oh, how wonderful! What about the rest of the family? Would they have moved to the countryside or some such? You and I would remain in Sans-Terre, though, for certain. After all, I have my work writing novels! Yes, I'd still be earning an income. I've been able to put a little money aside already, in fact. I've saved up about fifty thousand algiers."

After a pause, he said, "That's an unexpectedly large sum."

"I've simply had no need to spend it. Anyway, it means that even if you retired from military service, I'd be able to provide for you. And perhaps you could find work as a bodyguard and make use of your gorilla strength."

"Gorilla strength? What is that, might I ask?"

"A couple like that would make for an entertaining story. Actually, though, you're an intelligent man with all kinds of knowledge, so you'd be able to get a

job outside of the military as well. You could become an accountant or a lawyer, or perhaps a teacher. I think we'd be able to live a perfectly fine life wherever we ended up."

He laughed awkwardly. "Well, even if we did lose our noble status, my family's business incomes would still be there. I wouldn't let you suffer any hardship."

I knew that this idea was only a joke, but if that day really did come, the most important aspects of my life wouldn't change. As long as Lord Simeon was with me, every day would shine brightly.

"I doubt the Order would let you go so easily, in any case. Speaking of which, has your official punishment been decided?"

The messenger hadn't come purely to give a situation report. His main reason for being there was to inform Lord Simeon about this important decision.

In response, Lord Simeon nodded with a look that betrayed no concern. "My house arrest has been extended to the end of the month, and my promotion to colonel has been canceled."

"Oh no," I said, unable to keep from expressing my disappointment. House arrest was one thing, but it was such a shame for him to lose out on his promotion. "That seems so unfair. Your actions are what prevented the worst outcome. You deserve gratitude, not punishment."

The reason Lord Simeon was at home during the day was not because of poor health or a request for leave. In truth, he had been blamed for the incident and confined to his home.

Smiling at my aggrieved reaction, Lord Simeon sat down beside me and wrapped an arm around my shoulder.

"It doesn't surprise me. Security is the royal guards' responsibility. It was an inexcusable oversight to have failed to uncover a plot of this nature in advance and take measures to prevent it. Captain Poisson is being punished as well. Apparently his pay is being docked for ten months."

"Even so..."

“Firing a cannon on palace grounds without prior approval also provoked quite some ire. It was a decision that far exceeded my authority.”

“Approval? The only ones who could have given it were minutes away from dying. How can you be blamed for that when firing the cannon is what saved the royal family?”

I pouted. With a look of amusement, Lord Simeon poked my puffed out cheek.

“His Majesty and the Captain understand that, of course. However, there’s no denying that the slightest mistake would have been the difference between saving them and delivering the final blow myself. I took an extremely dangerous gamble. It’s inevitable that I’d face criticism.”

“Hmph.” He poked my cheek again and air came out of my mouth.

“My superiors did what they could to reduce the punishment. Apparently there were those calling for my dismissal or imprisonment. Losing a promotion is hardly even a punishment at all. The merits and demerits of my actions were carefully weighed up and a common ground was found that could satisfy both sides.”

He spoke in a calm manner without the slightest hint of frustration on his face. He had probably already considered all of this when deciding to fire the cannon. Though it wasn’t as drastic as putting his life on the line, he had still been prepared to sacrifice himself.

Maybe there really had been no way around this. Still, the ones demanding he be punished were no doubt the ones who already regarded him with great enmity, so it was vexing that they could use the situation to their own ends.

“Surely you find it frustrating,” I said, on the verge of tears.

Lord Simeon reached out with his hand and gently stroked my cheek. Then he gave me a soft kiss, barely more than a peck.

“I haven’t been told that I’ll never be promoted again for the rest of my life, merely that I have to forego it on this occasion. It’s already a rare honor to have the rank of lieutenant colonel at my age. Lieutenant would be more typical. When people talk about me behind my back and say that I was given

preferential treatment rather than earning it based on my own abilities, I can't exactly argue to the contrary."

This was true. He was the heir to an esteemed earldom and the close confidant of the crown prince. In his career, he'd been shown a certain degree of favoritism. There were plenty of military officers who were older than him but had lower ranks. His abilities were definitely equal to the rank, but he still hadn't progressed to it in a manner that could be considered entirely fair, which resulted in quite a bit of backlash.

"You didn't turn it down, though."

Lord Simeon was typically serious to a fault about these matters, but he hadn't refused this special treatment. The reason wasn't the sort of greedy ambition that others accused him of. If it had been purely for his own benefit, he probably wouldn't have accepted the position of Vice Captain, and would have been happy working as a regular member of the Order.

Confirming this, he said, "I can't serve His Highness fully without a position of authority. For that reason, I have no desire to withdraw from it no matter how much I'm slandered and criticized. My own personal principles aren't the highest priority."

Given how often he was described as being completely inflexible, he was remarkably forthright in making that statement. Though he could be stubborn as a mule, he drew reasonable boundaries. If it was for the greater good, he didn't care how many accusations of being sly and crafty were thrown his way. He was strong-willed enough to accept it all.

I rested my head on his shoulder. "If you're satisfied with that, then I'm happy. I shall simply believe in you and stay by your side."

Whatever the world said, Lord Simeon was a hero to me. The greatest hero, in fact. He had His Highness, His Majesty, and the Captain on his side. His subordinates in the Royal Order of Knights also deeply cherished him even as they complained and called him the Demon Vice Captain. The only ones making a fuss were outside parties. Everyone close to him was an ally.

That was a perfectly fine situation. I didn't care if he was a colonel, a lieutenant, or even a lowly foot soldier. Lord Simeon was Lord Simeon, and that

was what mattered.

“So your house arrest has been extended to the end of the month? That must be awkward for everyone else.”

“The Foundation Day ceremony is over, at least. In terms of the cleanup, Captain Poisson will have to do his best without me. I’ll gladly take the opportunity for some rest and relaxation. I had to suffer my wife being taken away from me so soon after our wedding. Besides, it’s a relief not to have to take my eyes off you when you’re in this state.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” I said, pretending to be angry.

He started laughing.

At that moment, a knock at the door interrupted us. “Sorry to bother you,” said Joanna, entering with the butler. They carried several large bouquets of flowers and boxes tied with ribbons. “A number of get well gifts have arrived for the young mistress.”

“Thank you. Oh, these are from Ambassador Nigel.”

As I looked at the card attached to one of the bouquets, a smile spread across my face. He’d written that a personal visit had been denied on the grounds of it being too early in my recovery, so he’d come again soon. He had concluded with some faintly inappropriate words of encouragement about hoping I’d be well again soon so I could make him smile the way I always did.

“Honestly, Lord Simeon. A visit would surely be all right.”

“If you have a visitor and get too animated, you’ll break out in a fever again. This one’s from Miss Aurelia, I see.”

“Really? What a pleasant surprise. Quick, let me see it right away.”

I took the card from his hand. Even though the prince’s engagement had closed off any hope of her becoming queen, the high-minded golden rose used words just as haughty as ever. She came across as cruel, but deep down she had a thoughtful and considerate heart. I pictured her face, always aloof and unable to be honest about her kind feelings. Knowing Lady Aurelia, she had no shortage of beautiful romances waiting for her. I was sure she’d find a prince of

her own before too long.

Get well presents had arrived from both princesses as well. There were even some sweets and a bouquet from Duke Silvestre. The sweets from him left me somewhat nervous. *Should I be celebrating this? Are they definitely safe to eat?*

Lord Simeon looked quizzically at one of the gifts. “Who’s this from?”

He held the small, flat box in his hand. Attached to it was an envelope with no sender marked on it.

“It was delivered by the postman,” said the butler. “As far as I’ve seen, there’s no indication of who sent it.”

This prompted Lord Simeon to insist it was too dangerous for me to open and to do so himself. After doing so, he froze, a look of disquiet forming on his features.

“What’s wrong, Lord Simeon? Who’s it from?”

I peered down at the note, wondering if there was some sort of harassment afoot. *If someone’s written a mean comment, that doesn’t bother me at all.* When I looked, though, only a few short words were included.

“To you, my love now and always. L”

Lord Simeon and I both stared at the card.

The butler bowed and withdrew, and Joanna also left to find vases for the flowers. Now that we were alone again, silence reigned for a few moments.

“Damned thief,” Lord Simeon growled.

I’m right, then? The “L” stands for Lutin? To be fair, I can’t think of any other Ls who would write something like that and send it to me.

“I wonder how he knew I was injured.”

“He’s a spy, so he probably has all sorts of ways of obtaining information. For all we know, he’s infiltrated the country again.”

Lord Simeon shook the box. It made no particular sound to indicate what was inside.

“I’d like to see what he gave me, at least.”

“I’ll open it. You don’t mind, do you?” Despite the question, he spoke in a tone that brooked no disagreement.

I nodded and he unwrapped the box. When he took off the lid, a pair of women’s gloves were inside.

They were high quality lace gloves made from extra fine silk thread. Their length was enough to reach to the upper arm. The brilliant white threads were decorated with faint purple embroidery. It looked as though violets were nonchalantly growing amongst the field of grass formed by the patterned stitching. Violets were an odd match for summer wear, but the inclusion of a flower I adored was enough to leave me charmed by the gloves at first sight.

They’re simply lovely! What utterly fantastic gloves!

They were probably meant as a means to hide my scar. He’d given me these so that instead of feeling ashamed, I could be chic and beautiful. The gloves themselves might have been an off-the-shelf item, but there was no doubt that the embroidery was a custom order. The color was pale enough that it wouldn’t stand out, and there were enough other ladies who wore clothes decorated with their favorite flower regardless of the season. I could wear these at any nobleman’s ball.

Trust him to choose something that matches my taste so perfectly. He really is thoughtful in that regard.

Perhaps carelessly, I took a liking to these gloves and began to feel joy at having received them. However, I held back from expressing that too openly.

Instead, I looked at Lord Simeon with trepidation. *No matter how fabulous they are, I suppose a married woman shouldn’t be getting overly excited about a gift from another man.*

He glared at them sullenly. Then, after a few moments, he let out a breath. “If you like them, I don’t mind you wearing them.”

“Really? But...”

He handed me the box. I took it rather gingerly and pondered what to do.

If I wear these, I can be sure that Lord Simeon won’t feel happy about it. It

would be one thing if the man who gave them was a mere acquaintance or friend. Lutin wishes to be more than that, however. Though it may have only been idle whimsy on his part, he has tried to woo me on more than one occasion. How could a husband see his wife be thrilled at a present from such a man without getting upset about it? If the situation were reversed, I'd feel uncomfortable as well.

"I won't wear them," I said at last, closing the lid.

I decided it was enough to appreciate the sentiment behind the gift. Rather than reciprocating Lutin's feelings for me, I'd chosen a life with Lord Simeon. Wearing them wouldn't have been right.

"Are you certain? You seem to like them."

"Only, I hope you don't mind if I keep them for the time being. I might pass them on to someone else at some point, but it would be rather rude to give away a gift so soon after receiving it."

I put the box down and smiled. Lord Simeon seemed to be deliberating and searching for the right response, but after a while he gave up and simply exhaled again. "I'm sorry for being so narrow-minded."

"No, this is perfectly normal. If you were overjoyed to receive a gift from another woman, I wouldn't like that either. However, I don't believe this gift was chosen frivolously, so I'd like to show the appropriate gratitude for all the kind consideration he put into it. I hope you'll allow me that, at least."

"Certainly," he replied, though he didn't sound certain at all.

I leaned against Lord Simeon and decided to be a little demanding. "Can you buy me some gloves instead? It won't really bother me, but people are sure to stare if I go out with my scar on display."

"Absolutely. I'll buy you as many pairs as you could ever want." He paused a moment. "Perhaps I should give you this first, however."

Lord Simeon retrieved something from his pocket and handed it to me. At first I thought it was another gift from someone else, but then he told me it was something he'd ordered. The box was small enough to fit into my hands.

“That rogue had to steal my thunder. I should have given it to you sooner rather than waiting for the perfect moment.”

The box was covered with fine velvet and bore the mark of a long-established jewelry store I knew very well indeed.

“What is it, I wonder? Oh!”

Opening the box revealed a dazzling brooch. It included an abundance of red gemstones that together formed the shape of a flower—one that looked similar to a double-flowered chrysanthemum but wasn’t.

“It’s a dahlia, isn’t it? How wonderful. And are these all rubies? What an extravagant gift. Thank you so much. But...why?”

“You asked me, didn’t you?”

I couldn’t recall asking for a brooch. It took a second to realize what he was referring to, but I soon remembered. I’d said I wanted a ring. In an effort to get one up on His Highness, I’d made the request without really thinking.

“How did the ring become a brooch, though?”

No matter how little interest one had in fashion, a ring would never be confused with a brooch. If nothing else, a ring was far more affordable, potentially requiring only a single jewel. A brooch this lavish would cost many times the price. Even for Lord Simeon, for whom this made no great difference, it was odd.

He grasped my left hand and, taking great care not to irritate the wound, gently pulled it toward him. Then he drew his lips to my ring finger in a manner much like a greeting delivered to a lady. Though the wedding ring had once been lost, it had been remade and now shone proudly.

“You already have a ring,” he said.

He wore one of the same color. They were a matching pair, entirely unique to us. A symbol of our shared feelings. Already surrounding my finger was an item that made me more conscious of his existence than of anything else.

“I’ll buy you whatever jewelry you like. Necklaces, earrings, you name it. However, I’d like this to be your only ring.”

Chuckling slightly, I extended out my other hand, too. I put my hands around his face and pulled him toward me. Following my lead, he bent down closer to me.

“What about my engagement ring?” I asked. “It doesn’t suit me yet, so I’m waiting until I’m older and have more presence before I start wearing it.”

“You can certainly wear that as well,” he said. “In which case, it would be more refined to avoid wearing another jeweled ring with it anyway.”

“But no rings apart from that?”

“No rings apart from that.”

As we laughed to one another, his lips came nearer. He delicately lowered my arm to avoid putting any pressure on it. I closed my eyes as he gently supported my back and pulled me toward him.



An instant before our lips met, we were interrupted by a powerful leap from the cat. I yelped, and Lord Simeon emitted a gasp of surprise.

When I opened my eyes, she was sitting between us in my lap.

“Chouchou!”

But even as I scolded her, I laughed. Even though she’d been ignoring me, she couldn’t bear to be forgotten about. *Fitting behavior from a pampered princess.*

“Must you do this again? Your mother’s in recovery, so you must be careful. Come over here.” Lord Simeon sighed and moved her over to his lap.

It appeared he had thoroughly accepted his parental role. Although he’d told me he wasn’t overly fond of cats because they never listened to a word anyone said, he still wasn’t shying away from taking care of her. The cat sprawled out in his lap and he stroked her without any sign of reluctance. The Demon Vice Captain had been thoroughly ensnared. The cat’s cuteness was an all-powerful force.

This was a moment of great peace and happiness—two people and one animal at perfect ease. Would another little one be added too, at some point? I wondered when that day would come.

“When your house arrest is over, you’ll have a lot of work waiting for you, I suppose. After this, we won’t have so much time to spend together.”

“In a way, I’m actually rather grateful to my detractors. My vacation has officially been extended. A chance like this is indeed rather unlikely to come up again. If you have any special requests, now is the time.”

“Ah! In that case, could you play the violin for me? I meant to ask you as soon as we returned home, but I completely forgot. I’d so love to hear my husband play again.”

Laughing, he agreed to my request. He rang the bell to summon a servant, and in the moment that his hand moved away from Chouchou, she got up and went back to my lap. *Don’t think I didn’t see that flash of disappointment on your face, Lord Simeon!* He played it off as concern about my wound, but I was certain he wanted to keep holding her himself.

Addressing the cat, I asked what I should have him play for us. Chouchou feigned a lack of interest in me; her pointy ears twitched and her tail shook.

My life was idyllically happy. I wished that we could somehow stay like this forever.

The graceful sound of the violin filled the room. He played the same sweet love song as he had for our duet. I stroked the cat and gazed in enchantment at my beautiful, wonderful husband.

It was a quiet and peaceful summer's day. As I sat surrounded by the large quantities of flowers I'd been given, love and well-being flowed all around.

The Headaches of Simeon Flaubert

“I wonder if the pampered little royal guard will be able to look at this without retching,” muttered a voice somewhere nearby.

The policeman beside Simeon grew flustered and glared at the speaker to silence him. Meanwhile, Simeon stripped away the cloth covering the corpse. The stench surrounding it grew drastically more intense. His aide, standing behind him, put a hand over his mouth and groaned.

When the body had been found snagged on a wharf on the Latour, the man had already been dead for several days. Due to the season, the body was already considerably decomposed, and the damage sustained while flowing downriver had been extensive as well. Anyone who looked at such a corpse without prior experience of such things was guaranteed to lose their appetite. The swollen face no longer held any resemblance to a living, breathing person.

“Well?” asked the policeman anxiously as Lord Simeon stared at the body. He was less worried about the results and more concerned that Lord Simeon might throw up or faint. After all, he looked like a dignified and pretty young man who would have no experience with the grim realities of the world.

However, Simeon finished examining the body and neatly put the cloth back in place. “It is indeed the man we were searching for. Thank you for informing me. I appreciate it.”

“Oh, yes, you’re welcome.”

The policeman was visibly surprised that not only could this well-bred young nobleman view a corpse without even turning pale, he could also make such a clear deduction given the state of the body. Ignoring this, Simeon asked for the body to be processed, then left the morgue.

“That was certainly...quite something, wasn’t it?” said the aide wearily while walking alongside him. “Are you certain it was him? There weren’t many details to compare other than his hair color.”

“We’d heard that he had a large mole on the inside of his right elbow. That’s a noteworthy detail and matched exactly.”

“You spotted that? Well, what a relief that it was still there to look at.”

“Indeed. If the mole had been on his left elbow, we wouldn’t have been able to confirm it.”

Simeon’s pace was as brisk as ever as he made his way outside. Though Alain was well aware that his superior officer was far braver than you’d expect from his appearance, he couldn’t help being impressed nonetheless. He wondered if there was anything in the entire world that could shock him.

There was, he realized. When it concerned his wife, even the Vice Captain lost his composure. Then again, there was probably no one who could have anything to do with his wife and not find themselves deeply affected.

After leaving the building, they went to collect their horses. However, before getting too far, Simeon stopped.

The pair were ambushed by a man with magnificent honey-colored hair that glistened in the sunlight. “Hello there,” he said. “Any news? Looking at your face, I’d say you had a fruitful visit.”

Compared to Alain’s boss, this dashing young fellow had an entirely different air of elegance about him. Internally, Alain was astonished, wondering how the man had heard they would be there.

Simeon sounded stunned as well. “Word certainly travels fast. I’m also rather surprised that the ambassador from Easdale would make a personal visit to a police station. Is there some aspect of this case that makes you unable to observe from a distance?”

“How could I ever stand idly by when an attempted regicide was afoot? It’s of great interest, I assure you. Purely from a diplomatic relations standpoint, of course.”

“Or an idle curiosity standpoint—and I’d hazard a guess that it’s far more of one than the other.”

With a shrug of the shoulders, Simeon walked on. Nigel Shannon followed

alongside him as though this were the most natural thing in the world. “Would it be correct to assume that this man who plotted to have the housemaid poison the royal family was himself merely a puppet? Now his lips have been promptly sealed. I don’t exactly feel sorry for him, but it’s still rather a waste of a life.”

“If your information network is proving so fruitful, I’d appreciate it if you could tell us who the puppet master was. I don’t suppose you’ve discovered anything?”

“Nothing new. We’re in the same position as you are.”

His eyes, the same color as his hair, looked at Simeon searchingly as if to say: you’re having experts of your own work on this, aren’t you?

Simeon didn’t reply. He reclaimed his horse, pulled it by the reins, and went out to the road in front of the station.

“We’d rather not involve ourselves in a dispute between two other countries,” Nigel continued, “but we can’t simply ignore Orta’s rampage either. If the military assumes power, nothing good will come of it. Despite their well-established discord with Smerda, they’re declaring war for reasons beyond a territorial dispute. If we merely wait to see what happens, they might launch an invasion to the west next. Lagrange’s bountiful economy must look awfully appealing.”

Though keeping a light, conversation tone, Nigel cut straight to the heart of the matter. Simeon gave him a sidelong glance with no change in his expression. “If Orta were to attack Lagrange, I wouldn’t fancy their chances of success.”

“Not if they were to stick to honest measures. That’s why they’d want to infiltrate beforehand and diminish Lagrange’s power. The reformist faction has proven to be rather a useful tool. You’d better keep a careful watch or they might be used again in a similar fashion. Also, Orta’s not foolish. They’re forging allies as well. After so many years of hard-earned peace, there are uneasy rumblings among the northern countries. If things continue along this path, there may be a war the likes of which we’ve never seen before. I believe that Easdale and Lagrange will have to bury the hatchet and become allied in true

friendship.”

Simeon took a single breath and mounted his horse. He looked down from this higher vantage point, remaining as shrewd as ever. “I can’t say I disagree, but you’re talking to the wrong person. I’m merely a royal guard. Given your role, your first port of call should be the Minister for Foreign Affairs, I believe.”

Despite being brushed aside so curtly, Nigel didn’t seem to mind at all. He returned Simeon’s gaze with a jovial smile. “Talking to you is the most direct route. There’s no better way to reach not only His Highness the Crown Prince, but His Majesty the King as well.”

Simeon declined to respond to this point and set his horse walking. The other man didn’t follow; he simply stood and watched Simeon go. “Your help is much appreciated! Oh, also, I’ll pay a visit soon to wish your wife a speedy recovery.”

“Her fever hasn’t subsided yet, so I’d ask you to refrain for the time being.” The knight on horseback didn’t turn to look, replying only with a frosty voice.

Nigel smiled at his valet, who had walked over to his side. “Awfully jealous, isn’t he? I don’t recall doing anything worthy of such vigilance.”

“It’s an everyday occurrence, master. Who wouldn’t feel a need to be vigilant after seeing how you tend to act?”

When the boy coldly pointed this out, showing his master no mercy, Nigel’s bitter smile grew even wider. After watching the eye-catchingly gallant knights ride away, the two of them finally left as well.

This scene occurred roughly seven days after the attack that had shaken the Kingdom of Lagrange. The populace had been greatly alarmed to learn about the assassination plot targeting the king and the whole royal family, and it had featured prominently in the papers for several days in a row.

In the immediate aftermath, Simeon was so focused on the investigation that he hardly returned home. He applied pressure to the men who had been arrested, extracting confessions out of them in a rather forceful manner, thus uncovering more and more co-conspirators. Since they hadn’t been able to prevent the plan from being carried out, the royal guards faced criticism from every quarter. If they couldn’t at least track down and capture those

responsible and uncover the real truth, it would be a disgrace.

However, no matter how hard they worked, the royal guards had been unable to locate two individuals. One was the so-called engineer who had put the idea into the reformist faction's heads and set up the apparatus that ignited the fire. No one had a clear idea of this person's background, and their whereabouts were also unknown.

Though the reformist faction was a movement with quite a bit of momentum, it had no defining figureheads other than Marquess Rafale. Even if they could all work decently well under someone else's leadership, they were entirely unfit to be leaders themselves. The mastermind of the assassination plot must have been someone who was able to craftily lead them and incite such an incident.

Hearing the particulars of how this person came to be involved, it was clear as day that his very reason for approaching the reformist faction was to take advantage of them. It wasn't simply a matter of a small band of extremists committing a reckless act on their own.

The other missing figure had been located today, but unfortunately he wasn't in a position to answer any questions. Simeon didn't believe the two incidents were unrelated. It was possible the man who'd been killed was being used by the same person who had manipulated the reformist faction.

"This completes my report. I can only apologize profusely for being unable to gather any definitive evidence, thus leaving the case unresolved up to this point."

Simeon looked around the conference room and was met by harsh expressions. The room had been cleared of all but him, his superior officer, and the crown prince; the latter two each heaved a sigh.

"So the trail's dried up?" said Prince Severin. "Looks as though there is indeed a spy lurking in the shadows."

Captain Poisson nodded. "I don't mean to shirk my responsibility, but this isn't a matter that can be dealt with by the royal guards alone. The entire military needs an official directive to strengthen their surveillance and be on alert."

"Quite. We'll need to coordinate closely with our neighbors as well. Did the

ambassador make any specific requests?”

Simeon answered the question. “First of all, he’d like an audience with you and His Majesty. My impression is that he wishes to avoid going through intermediaries and negotiate directly.”

“If Easdale is making such a request, it’s rather likely that Orta has already made contact with them, wouldn’t you say?”

“It’s highly likely. He didn’t say anything along those lines, but his words did hint toward that conclusion.”

“It’s the most obvious action for Orta to take in their position,” said Captain Poisson, playing with the tassels on his uniform. “If they’re planning to attack a powerful foe, it makes sense to join forces with that foe’s enemies. They must have judged that if they proposed an alliance, Easdale would accept.”

“A scant hundred years ago, they probably would have.” Prince Severin rested his elbow on the table. “I thought Henri’s engagement had drawn quite some ire from them, so it would be rather a boon if they came over to our side instead. With any luck, they’re keen to avoid getting bogged down in a war. It’s tough to imagine any good resulting from being drawn into Orta’s reckless nonsense.”

“If they accept Orta’s offer, it’s entirely plausible that a multinational war will break out. That’s surely something Easdale would do their best to avoid.”

Simeon spoke dispassionately, never relaxing his upright posture. Even though he’d been unable to bring the case to a satisfying conclusion, he felt this was unavoidable given the circumstances. As intense as he was when pursuing a case, he was still able to be objective and detached.

The trio gathered around the desk and continued their discussion.

“The ambassador probably didn’t decide to approach me of his own volition. It likely came as an order from his country. I’d ask you to advise His Majesty to offer an audience as soon as possible.”

“Indeed, I’ll tell him forthwith. Blast it all, my engagement to Julianne is finally settled, and now I find myself entirely lacking in time to see her. She’s firmly ensconced in the duke’s residence as well. With all that learning she has to do,

somehow I feel even more distant from her than ever.”

The serious discussion had given way to the crown prince’s grumblings about his personal life. *It begins*, thought Simeon, looking away. He knew the prince wouldn’t manage to hold it in for long.

“I thought we could at least exchange letters every day, but Julianne told me to keep it to one every three days. When I protested that this was too long to wait, she extended it to five! Why must I be forced to suffer so!?”

His two subjects were not impressed by this question, though they kept their comments to themselves. Julianne was buried under a mountain of information and etiquette to learn before marrying into the royal family. It was absurd to think she’d have time to write a letter every single day.

After taking a sip of the tea served by Simeon’s aide, which had long since gotten cold, Poisson did offer some words of advice. “Your feelings are understandable, Your Highness, but don’t forget to consider her feelings, too. It would be tragic if you were to ruin the happiness you’ve only just found. Generally speaking, women attach great importance to matters of the heart. Sometimes what’s needed is a strong, demanding love, but the most essential element is kindness. It’s crucial to understand her point of view, her circumstances, her wishes. If you slack on this front you can quickly find yourself in danger. You’ll be scolded for being a thoughtless and inconsiderate man. I will say there are plenty of cases where women are lacking in understanding of our circumstances, but that doesn’t mean you can win her over by arguing. To a certain extent this makes me a henpecked husband, but there’s a knack to finding the right balance. That’s what’s kept us a happy couple for twenty years. Maintaining a relationship takes hard work.”

“Even if you’re a henpecked husband, at least you’re able to see her.”

The prince fell prostrate on the table. It seemed he had no objections in principle to being henpecked. In fact, he’d said exactly that when proposing. One of the man’s strengths was his lack of excessive pride, but being too far on the other end of the scale wasn’t ideal either, perhaps.

“I daresay I’m entitled to grumble, what with my engagement ceremony being ruined and my fiancée being spirited away so I can hardly see her.

Complaining about that is entirely reasonable, is it not? And it's all Orta's fault. I say we give them the war they want, quite frankly. Let's smash them to smithereens."

Not all of that is Orta's fault, thought Simeon, again keeping his interjections to himself. At least half of it was simply the training required for her to marry him, which ultimately meant it was for the benefit of his marriage. Julianne and House Silvestre were working hard for his sake. He wanted to give the prince a warning that if he complained regardless, he really might put her off entirely.

Instead, Simeon replied, "It would be better to avoid even joking about that. If we really did get embroiled in a war, it would only push back your wedding."

After receiving this warning, Severin leaned forward vigorously. "I'm well aware! But I can hardly believe you're not angry as well. Marielle was wounded! Even if the perpetrators were the reformist faction, it was Orta fanning the flames."

The moment he heard this, Simeon's glasses glinted coldly and sparks flew from his whole body. At least, that was the air he had about him. There may not have been any real sparks, but there might as well have been.

Even as he exuded a frigid aura, burning flames rose in his eyes. Whether he was hot or cold, a growl came from his mouth. "Are you honestly suggesting I'm not angry about that?"

"Oh. No, certainly, not at all. It must have set your blood boiling, I'm quite certain. Yes, and frankly, it sets my blood boiling as well." Having seemingly forgotten about his personal gripes from mere moments ago, Severin rushed to comment further on this point. "The poor thing. It must have hurt terribly. I suspect it may leave a scar as well. Even Marielle herself must be rather down in the dumps, all things considered. She...is down in the dumps, is she not? Despite her unique tendencies, surely even Marielle can't be gleefully welcoming her injury as a newfound research opportunity. Now, I'll have to conjure up the perfect get well gift. Ah yes! I can discuss it with Julianne."

He ultimately brought the topic of conversation right back to his fiancée, but before he could get too far, Simeon interrupted by standing from his chair with determination. His master jerked back and his superior officer fought to contain

his laughter.

Simeon issued a salute to both of them. "Since my report is complete, I'll take my leave now. I must meet with Marquess Rafale and question him."

"You're going to see him?" asked Poisson. "Isn't he in critical condition?"

Simeon nodded grimly. "Yes, but I'm told he's recovered consciousness and his condition has stabilized."

"I see. Still, I wonder if he'll really be up to questioning. I have a feeling the doctor might not permit your visit."

"Apparently his responses are entirely lucid. A long interview will be impossible, but he will have to endure my presence for a short while, at least."

After this cold statement, Simeon turned on his heel. The other two men watched him leave with a question in their minds as to whether Simeon was using the marquess as a means to vent his anger, but they weren't foolish enough to ask this aloud.

Simeon walked with loud, long strides to the room inside the palace where the marquess was being kept under close guard.

"So you say you had no knowledge of the plan until immediately before it was executed?"

"Yes," the marquess murmured. "The others knew if they told me, I'd oppose them. They no doubt assumed that if they didn't reveal it until it was too late, I'd give in and go along with it..."

The man, lying flat on the bed, showed neither obstinacy nor weakness in the face of his political opponent. He merely answered the questions in a direct manner. His face was an unhealthy shade, and he could only speak slowly, but he maintained a dignity that one wouldn't expect of a patient in recovery. When the doctor and nurses had tried to prevent the interview, the marquess personally insisted and made them stand down.

Despite being the leader and rallying point for the reformist faction, he had been unable to keep his comrades from running wild. He'd allowed a horrific act to be committed on his watch. Just as the royal guards ascribed blame to him,

he had to face up to his own mistake, and rather than shying away from this, he took responsibility. Internally, Simeon praised him for this. They were in adversarial positions, and Simeon had no particular liking for the man, but he did admire his honorable attitude. It was clear that he was of a different class compared to the others.

Wondering if the marquess might have any information about the engineer who had disappeared, Simeon narrowed the focus to this for his remaining questions, judging that the conversation would have to end in short order. As expected, Marquess Rafale started struggling to breathe, and his face screwed up in pain. He tried to fight through it, but it was simply too much for him. When cold sweat finally caked his forehead, the doctor stepped in. "Vice Captain, I can't allow you to proceed any further."

The doctor stood between Simeon and the bed and glared. The nurses did their utmost to guard the marquess as well. With great respect for their work ethic, Simeon decided to withdraw. He hadn't learned all that much, but there wasn't much he could do about that. The man would be no use to him if he died.

"My apologies for causing undue strain during your recovery. I intend to visit again to discuss these matters in more detail, but I'll allow you to recuperate first. Thank you kindly for your assistance."

With a bow, he turned to leave. However, just as he was about to exit the room, the patient himself called him back. "How is the young lady?"

"What young lady?" Simeon replied. He turned back, filled with sudden hope that he was about to gain some new information. This was the first he'd heard of a woman associated with the plot.

However, his expectations were soon dashed.

"When I was stabbed, there was a woman who happened to be there. I don't remember her face, but she was rather young. She was wearing glasses, I believe. And...she had brown hair..."

Simeon suppressed a sigh. He knew *exactly* who the man meant.

"She was the one who told you where to find me, wasn't she? I have to know

who she is.”

“Why are you so eager to know?” Simeon asked with a sense of foreboding.

“Well,” said the marquess, straining, “I owe her my life. I must thank her, of course.”

A reasonable reply, but delivered with a faintly bashful tone that told Simeon his suspicion was correct. Deep lines formed on Simeon’s forehead.

“She might have been frightened for her life, but she ran so courageously. She even ripped her clothes to shreds without a moment’s reluctance. The lace she discarded remains etched into my memory. She ruined such an extravagant dress without a care for its value, then promised to save me and the king. Such a kind, heroic young lady...”

Even as he gasped for breath, the man spoke at length. The fiery glow in his eyes couldn’t have been purely due to his physical state. They seemed to be focused intently on that memory. Simeon’s past experiences warned him of how badly this could go.

“I’ll be sure to tell her. I’m certain my wife will be equally glad to hear such high praise.”

He had to nip this in the bud as quickly as possible, so he had chosen to bluntly make the truth known. The key word provoked just the reaction he was aiming for.

“Your wife?”

“Yes. The person you’re referring to is my wife. I’ll be sure to share your words with her. The knowledge that rescue arrived in time will be more than enough recompense for her. You needn’t worry about any other expressions of gratitude.”

Lost for words, the man stared at Simeon. Simeon coldly ignored this and left at last.

He walked along the corridors in a far more thunderous mood than when he’d arrived, prompting all those he happened upon to jump out of his way. They all trembled as they watched him go past, wondering if there had been some

terrible development related to the recent incident, or if some new trouble had arisen.

The latter was true, but not in the way they expected.

Simeon proceeded, his face at ease but his eyes rigid. However, there was one person who showed no sign of fear and boldly struck up a conversation.

“Lieutenant Colonel Flaubert, may I have a moment?”

A familiar elegant lady had been waiting for him. A request from her amounted to no more and no less than a summons from one of his masters. He retracted his fangs and replied with perfect politeness.

However, what happened next only deepened the furrows on his brow. Upon reaching his office, Simeon found that for some reason Captain Poisson was waiting there, rudely sitting on his desk.

“What’s wrong? You’ve got that murderous look in your eye again. Did you learn something terrible? Or were you not able to meet with Marquess Rafale after all?”

He paused. “No, there’s nothing wrong. I spoke to him, but he wasn’t up to a particularly long conversation, so we only discussed the very basics. It seems that the so-called engineer first became involved with the reformist faction at least two months ago. Apparently he was active during the same period that there was a great deal of weapon smuggling going on.”

“Well, well.”

“Do you have some urgent news? If so, I apologize for keeping you waiting.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “No, it’s nothing overly pressing. Not at all. It’s just a little too loud in my office, that’s all.” Poisson’s expression said he was quite fed up.

Exhaustion now joined Simeon’s irritation as well. Poisson was still being subjected to an endless stream of uninvited guests blaming the royal guards for the incident and bringing questions, objections, and cutting remarks. However, Simeon’s office was unlikely to serve as a safe zone. If the Captain was away from his desk, the visitors would surely come looking for the Vice Captain.

Equally aware of this, Poisson hesitantly continued, “Anyway, I’m going to run off and hide somewhere. Before I do, there’s something I have to tell you. There’s a contingent of people who won’t back down over the fact that you fired the cannon without authorization. Your official punishment is planned for after the situation has calmed down somewhat, but they’re not best pleased with you walking around as if nothing’s wrong just because your fate is still pending.”

Simeon said nothing. Poisson shook his head forcefully, making it clear that he thought the whole matter was ridiculous.

“How were you even supposed to get ‘authorization’ in a moment like that? I’ll grant that you took a dangerous gamble, but that decisiveness is exactly what saved the royal family. If you’d stayed your hand, they’d all have lost their lives. I know it’s easy to say this in hindsight, but ultimately, the results speak for themselves. His Majesty is deeply grateful as well. I’ve even said that it would be far too awkward to lose you at this stage, with the investigation still ongoing.”

“I’m prepared to face my judgment.”

“All those fools did was run around in a panic, but the moment it was over, they were ready and waiting with objections to how you handled it. They’re all talk, same as ever. We’re the ones risking life and limb.”

“This is all within expectations. You needn’t worry on my account.”

“It’s easy for them to complain, but I wish they’d judge with the full picture in mind. They don’t seem to understand the current situation. Not to mention—”

Growing impatient with his superior’s endless rambling, Simeon interrupted. “Could I kindly ask you to skip to the conclusion?”

Poisson lost all sense of dignity and glared back at Simeon, pouting like a child. After falling silent for a moment, he said, “Until your punishment is decided, you’re under house arrest.”

He announced this with a distinct look of reluctance. Simeon saluted and accepted the directive.

“Understood, sir. I shall return to my home right away and begin my house

arrest.”

“You do realize that with you gone, all the responsibility will fall to me? I’m the one who’ll suffer most for this!”

“I apologize most heartily. I leave it in your capable hands.”

“My capable hands would rather remain empty, thank you very much!”

Though he didn’t say so, Simeon actually thought the timing was rather fortunate. It did mean he was being pulled off an in-progress investigation, but they had reached an impasse anyway, with further developments looking unlikely. They might still get more information from the reformist faction members who had been arrested, but beyond their involvement lay the machinations of the Republic of Orta, and on that front he didn’t expect any further clues to turn up.

He could leave the investigation to the Captain and his subordinates, and the Ortan business to the top brass. On his part, he was glad to have an opportunity to finally spend time at home.

He left his clamorous boss behind and promptly began preparing to leave. Always efficient, he had finished gathering his things in no time. “If you have need of me, please contact me at home,” he said as he made for the door. “The rest is up to you.”

“I told you, I’d rather it wasn’t! Must you be so damned eager? Say hello to your wife from me! Tell her best wishes!”

“Thank you.”

With an acrimonious goodbye from Poisson, Simeon left the room. He happened upon his aide straight away and updated him on the situation, giving orders to follow during his absence.

Then he left the Order’s headquarters. When others saw the workaholic rushing home, it was enough of a shock that they grew worried that something awful might have happened in his personal life.

He rode home on his favorite horse. With a refreshing breeze on his face as he trotted along, his mindset shifted, leaving work behind him.

He hadn't seen his wife for more than five days now. He'd arranged to receive detailed reports on her condition, but he feared she might now resent him, seeing him as a cold and unfeeling husband. Simeon had neither forgotten about her nor stopped caring. He truly wished he could have been with her to provide comfort and encouragement.

From what the servants had told him, she had a fever, but was otherwise healthy. Apparently she had caused everyone quite a bit of concern by smiling to herself and muttering things that made her sound deranged. "So this is how a fever feels? This is what it's like to be ill? Such valuable experience!" Her ability to derive enjoyment from any and every circumstance was alive and well.

Still, she would be glad for her husband to return to her side. He was relatively confident of that.

Though he had intended to go straight home, an idea suddenly occurred to him, and he decided to take a detour to the shopping district. Marielle had asked him for a ruby ring, he remembered. If he returned home with a gift, she'd surely be even more pleased to see him. He wasn't trying to buy her affections by apologizing with an expensive present, but if it could cheer her up slightly, there was no harm in that.

First that thief, and now Marquess Rafale. There seemed to be no end of men with their eye on her, and it gave him quite a headache. Though the marquess appeared calm and collected, in truth he was single-minded and passionate, and not only with regard to politics. Simeon didn't expect the man's newfound attraction to disappear easily, even if its object was already married and young enough to be his daughter. The case itself wasn't the only reason to handle the marquess with care.

To be fair, Marielle herself isn't the type to be easily swayed just because someone tries to woo her. Still, I can't be sure how the winds will change if her husband spends all his time engrossed in work while she's laid up in bed. I must always be demonstrating my love for her.

Riding south, he reached a busy street crowded with pedestrians and carriages. He slowed his horse to a walk. Soon he arrived at his destination: the store that had made the ring he wore on his right hand. There he intended to

buy something to bring joy to his wife.

Just then, a carriage came from the opposite direction, almost brushing him as it passed.

“Watch out for the fox, Vice Captain.”

Simeon’s head spun around to look when he heard the familiar voice. The carriage flew past without stopping. The speaker didn’t show his face at the window, either.

Simeon frowned. Had he misheard? No, he was certain. It was *him*. He’d given it away with those last two words.

There were a few different tones in which people called him “Vice Captain.” Some said it neutrally, some filled it with respect and fear, and others—his detractors—used it derisively, to dismiss his rank as undeserved.

And then there was the way that *he* said it.

It left a sour taste in Simeon’s mouth to know that the irritating common criminal had once again appeared and disappeared right in front of him. However, the words themselves had been a warning. What had the thief been so determined to tell him?

The fox. This had to refer to the man known as the “Silver Fox.” The Ortan operative had fallen into the sea and vanished. Was he still alive after all? Simeon even wondered for a moment if he had been the one who stirred up the reformist faction, but he quickly shook his head. It seemed too unlikely.

Even if the man in question hadn’t died, he’d sustained serious injuries. There was no way he could have healed completely by now. It was unthinkable that he’d sprung into action himself. On the other hand, it was entirely possible that he’d secretly left instructions for someone else.

It seemed he might have to confront that man again. *If so*, thought Simeon intrepidly, *I’ll capture him for certain this time*. Their troublesome neighbor was always playing sneaky tricks rather than coming to fight them head on. He felt it was high time to give them the punishment they deserved.

Although his attention had momentarily turned to his wife and his home, he

was already starting to think about the case and its international implications again. However, he stopped when he recalled something unfortunate.

That man—he'd been interested in Marielle as well. It hadn't been anything you'd call love; his feelings had been too warped for that. However, he had tried to kidnap her and make her his own.

A sense of unease closed in around his heart. Had that been the meaning behind the thief's warning? Was it about the implications for Marielle?

He hurriedly turned his horse around. Shopping could wait for another day. He could simply order the item delivered to his home. Right now, he wanted to be back with his wife as soon as he could possibly manage.

Racing at breakneck speed, Simeon made it home. The butler and his family were surprised to see him, but he barely registered their greetings and sped straight to his bedroom. When he burst into the room, his wife, in bed, reacted with shock.

"Lord Simeon? I'm happy to see you, but that's quite a frown. What's the matter?"

She was her usual easygoing self. He felt all the tension drain from him and fought the urge to sink to the floor, instead merely heaving a heavy sigh.

He realized that he might, perhaps, have been worrying a little too much. If Marielle had been in immediate danger, the thief would definitely have used a different method to inform him. How foolish he had been in jumping to conclusions.

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes, everything's fine. It's good to be home."

Regaining his composure, Simeon walked over to the bed. The lady's maid who had been attending to Marielle made way for him and left to make him tea. Marielle sat up and looked at him with confusion. Simeon bent down and gave her a kiss; her soft cheek was still burning hot.

"I'm sorry for leaving you here alone. Please, don't get up. Stay in bed. You must still be in a lot of pain."

The bandages wrapped around her thin arm were painful to look at. When he pressed on her shoulders, gently so as not to hurt her, Marielle smiled and fought back. “I’m quite all right. The doctor has provided me with excellent treatment. I was scared of getting stitches, but now the wound is closing and it’s much less painful. It’s one more experience I can put in my toolbox.”

Though she was surely still suffering, she spoke in a way that was very typical of her—all to reassure him, no doubt. Simeon’s heart filled up with love. His worries that she might resent him for being absent had been completely unfounded. Though she could appear childish, always eager to do whatever she liked, when it came to the important matters, she understood. She wasn’t a wife who would complain about that sort of thing.

“Do you have the rest of the day off?” she asked with barely concealed excitement. “Or did you come home to retrieve something, perhaps?”

He sat down beside her. Thinking that it must be tiring for her to sit up, he wrapped an arm around her shoulder for support.

“No, I’ll be at home for some time. Tomorrow, the next, and probably the day after that.”

She paused a moment. “Did your job give you the old heave-ho?”

Her serious expression as she asked this made him burst out laughing. “Another vulgar expression. What am I to do with you? Anyway, no, nothing like that. It might be better described as official leave.”

His wife blinked, evidently unsure what he meant. How could he explain? He wanted to address it in a careful manner that avoided making it sound too serious. After all, his punishment probably wouldn’t be too harsh in the end.

She didn’t speak a word of complaint, instead acting in an entirely sensible and understanding manner. However, she did appear to be rather happy to know that her husband would be at home for the foreseeable future. In a merry voice, she told him of all that had happened in his absence.

“And I’ve been receiving get well gifts from so many people, some of them very surprising indeed! To think I received a letter from the queen herself. Written by her own hand, no less. I saw her handwriting while working for her,

and it's unmistakably hers. What an honor for her to take the trouble!"

"Yes, indeed. Now get some rest. If you stay up all day, your fever will get worse."

"Her Majesty said such nice things about me. Even though I barely served her for any time at all, she thanked me for my hard work and dedication. She even said that my language skills and writing ability were superb. I'm sure it's just flattery, but I was thrilled to read such high praise nonetheless. I feel as though I'm starting to understand what you meant about having a good reputation."

"Oh, really? I'm glad to hear it."

Fighting to ensure his smile didn't falter, Simeon rebuffed Marielle's eager efforts to continue talking and insisted she get some rest. He knew that the queen wasn't merely flattering her, but had truly come to like her, but he kept that to himself.

Her Majesty had approached him immediately before he left the palace. "When she's fully recovered, I don't suppose I could have her as a permanent lady-in-waiting?"

Marielle had in fact earned an unexpectedly good reputation. In retrospect, this wasn't a surprise. A woman who mastered four or five languages would of course be deemed intelligent. When it came to writing, she had in fact made a profession of it, so she was more than experienced. Her ability to gather information was comparable to that of a spy. Her knack for remembering details about people was extraordinary enough to call her a walking who's who. And, above all, her mind worked incredibly quickly.

If the royal family knew all that, why *wouldn't* they want her in their entourage? Simeon occasionally treated it too lightly because of the rather specific driving force behind all her behavior, but the objective truth was that Marielle was a highly brilliant person.

No wonder everyone's trying to get their grubby paws on her. Simeon realized it was rude to include the royal family in such a statement, but he couldn't help thinking it. Why did his newlywed life have to be so filled with headaches?

Now it seemed he'd have to stave off not only an endless stream of men, but

even the queen. Who said Marielle was plain and lacking in presence? Only superficial people who were deceived by her surface camouflage. Even the powerful and influential noticed her charms and had their hearts captured. Though Marielle herself was hardly even aware of it, her flame drew all the moths to her one after another.

Being married to her didn't provide the slightest reassurance. He was sure to face an ever increasing horde of foes. He had to be extra careful to ensure his most precious treasure in the world wasn't stolen away from him.

"Oh yes, one more thing," said Marielle.

"Rest now. If you keep talking so excitedly, it'll be bad for your health."

He interrupted her never-ending words with a kiss. His beloved wife's eyes grew misty, and her cheeks reddened.

Then she asked him a question laden with implication. "You'll sleep with me tonight, won't you? My arm is much better, so you surely won't insist that we sleep in separate beds. Now that you're finally back, it would be awfully lonely to spend the night apart. I've been waiting so long."

He fell silent. With all his might, he forced himself to remember that she was wounded and ill with a fever. He fought back the urge to wrap his arms around her, to kiss her again, and follow his passion where it would inevitably lead. Now was not the time. He couldn't. He mustn't.

Then he realized it would have to be postponed regardless. How silly he had been. It was quickly clear they would just be snuggling up to one another while they slumbered, as if they were playing house.

This made him happy, to be sure, but Simeon still restrained a sigh. Those challenging nights would continue.

As he lay there, putting his urges aside, his mind raced. Her inner glow and sweet scent attracted all those around. Simeon wondered who had been the very first one to fall for her. In the end, for all that he called her lacking in awareness, he was in no position to talk.

World-shaking events were occurring, and his best friend was flaunting his love life at every turn. With all that was going on, there was never any time to

catch his breath. And yet, now he was finally able to bask in the moment of being a newlywed husband and wife.

Afterword

Now that the chaos of the two lovebirds' wedding is firmly in the past, it's time for everyone's favorite pathetic prince to have his turn. Hello there! It's me, Haruka Momo.

His Highness's appeal comes from how pathetic he is. It would be boring for him to be too happy and turn into a normal prince. However, if the heir to the throne keeps getting dumped, it'll spell trouble for the kingdom. I also felt like the character himself might start to hate me if he didn't get married soon, so this time I focused the story around his struggles.

I think this volume has a slightly different atmosphere to the previous ones. Marielle doesn't do too much fangirling, nor does she keep rushing about everywhere. There aren't many Simeon action scenes either. For the most part, it was more of a calm and gentle story. I guess if the main setting is the palace, Marielle can't exactly give into her curiosity and fangirl urges as much as usual. At the same time, the level of danger grew greater than ever before.

The relationship between the prince and the girl who's lived a slightly difficult life is a classic rags-to-riches story. Did you enjoy it?

The book was primarily a love story, but the last part involves a lot of furtive business and people working toward their own ends. In the short story at the end, I gave a peek at the events going on behind the scenes that Marielle doesn't know about. It's about her husband's work environment that he can't talk about at home. He seems like he has a lot on his mind aside from work, too. Hang in there, Simeon!

For the sixth volume, Maro has once again provided fabulous illustrations. Marielle looks so cute. And what about that pinup look for Simeon? I didn't know he could make that kind of face! Maro also drew Julianne and His Highness with so much charm. I'm grateful as always. I truly believe this series would be nothing if not for Maro.

For the manga version, Alaskapan is drawing the story in a way that's lively,

cute, funny, and dramatic. The skillful way the story is adapted and presented in comic form makes me forget it was my own story in the first place. It's like I get to savor it twice over, experiencing both the excitement of a regular reader and the joy of the original creator. I'm truly grateful for this as well.

As ever, I'd also like to thank my editor and the many other people without whom this book wouldn't exist. Last but not least, I hope all of you readers who picked up the book had a good time reading it. Thank you for sticking with me this long.

—Haruka Momo

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